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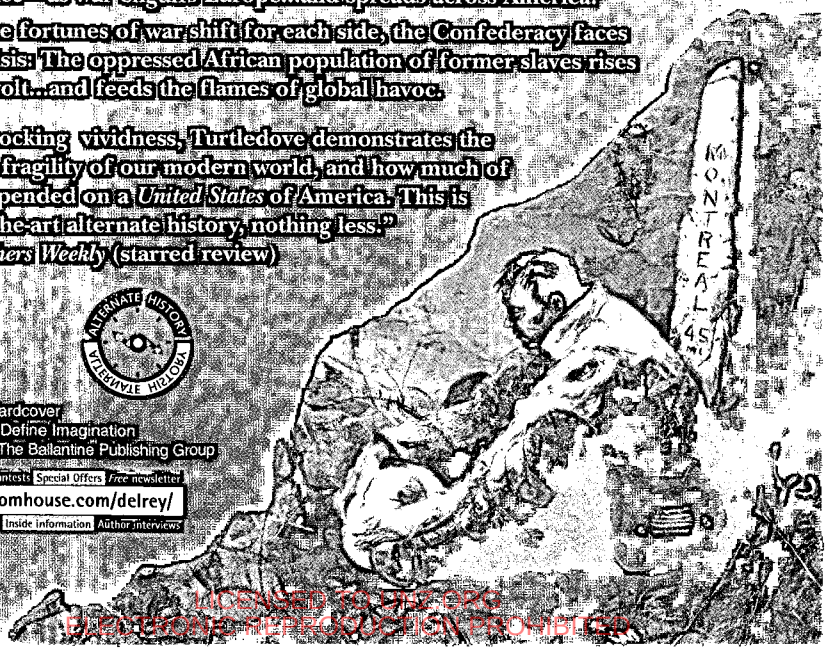

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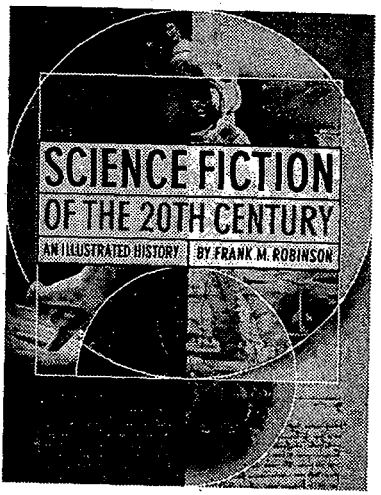

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October/November • 50th Anniversary Issue

NOVELLAS

CROCODILE ROCK 278 Lucius Shepard

NOVELETS

DARKROSE AND DIAMOND 47 Ursula K. Le Guin

A HERO OF THE EMPIRE 148 Robert Silverberg

THE HAPPIEST DAY OF HER LIFE 232 Kate Wilhelm

SHORT STORIES

MACS 18 Terry Bisson

OBJECTS OF DESIRE IN THE MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR 75 Harlan Ellison

HOW HEATHER MOON KEPT MY LIFE FROM GETTING COMPLETELY FOULED UP AGAIN 86 Ron Goulart

NEW YORK VIGNETTE 143 Theodore Sturgeon

FISH IN A BARREL 181 Jonathan Carroll

THE SHRINE FOR LOST CHILDREN 198 Poul Anderson

THE DYNASTERS 214 Howard Waldrop

KENNY 224 Robert Sheckley

A FISH STORY 254 Gene Wolfe

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH 269 Carol Emshwiller

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NONFICTION

A [REAL?] WRITER— HOMAGE TO TED STURGEON 105 **Judith Merril**

CARTOON

223 **Gahan Wilson**

DEPARTMENTS

EDITORIAL 8 **Gordon Van Gelder**

GUEST EDITORIAL: I WAS THERE THE DAY THE WORLD ENDED, I WAS THERE THE DAY THE WORLD BEGAN 10 **Ray Bradbury**

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 28 **Charles de Lint**

BOOKS 36 **Robert K.J. Killheffer**

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS: THE HISTORY OF SNIVELIZATION 192 **Paul Di Filippo**

A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK: EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED 259 **Gregory Benford**

COMING ATTRACTIONS 277

CURIOSITIES 322 **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**

CARTOONS: Danny Shanahan (16), John Jonik (147), Tom Cheney (191), Bill Long (213,231), Frank Cotham (253), Joseph Farris (320).
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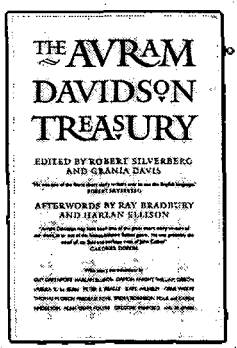
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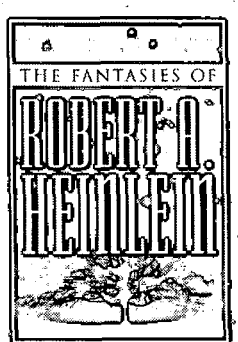

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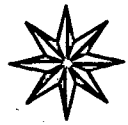

EDITORIAL

"In this new periodical, The Magazine of Fantasy, *I hope to satisfy every aspect of that demand for the finest available material in stories of the supernatural. I hasten to point out that by "supernatural" I mean all of the world of fantasy, from the thrilling to the chilling, from the comic to the cosmic — whatever our senses may reject, but our imagination logically accept."*

Thus did Mystery House publisher Lawrence E. Spivak launch this magazine half a century ago, and since then, the most significant change came with issue #2, when the words "Science Fiction" were added to the title to make the "cosmic" scope of the magazine more explicit. We've changed from a quarterly schedule to monthly to our current eleven-times-a-year plan, and the size of issues has fluctuated a bit, but basically, we've stuck to our original game plan: every month we bring you the finest non-realistic fiction we can set into type. (And would you believe our cover price has only increased ten-fold in all this time? Compare that with the price of paperbacks.)

We wanted to provide dazzling statistics regarding our 578 issues, but unfortunately the ol' Mercury House electric abacus blew out when we tried computing the number of letters we received in response to our film columns alone, so our best calculation for how much great material we've published is: a lot. Just listing all our contributors would take up most of an issue, so allow please the brevity of our acknowledgment to reflect the depth of our gratitude: thank you.

Nearly twenty-five years ago, James Gunn wrote that "A genre called science fiction will continue to exist, I believe, although the magazines in which it is published may not survive.... The unity of science fiction...will begin to disintegrate without the magazines as a focus." Styles have changed, players come and gone, but things haven't fallen apart, the center has held, and we have every intention of bringing you many fantastic beasts through the coming century. Stick around for the fun.

—Gordon Van Gelder

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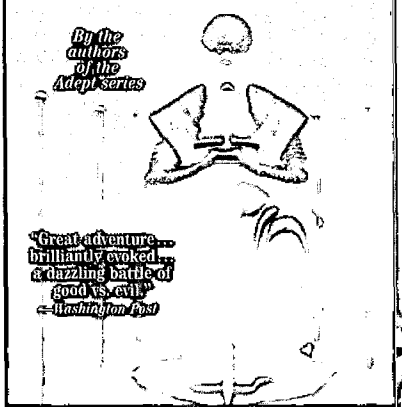
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ASPECT

WHERE IMAGINATION KNOWS NO BOUNDS

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Guest Editorial

Ray Bradbury

I Was There the Day the World Ended I Was There the Day the World Began

SURREYS disappear out of barns. Strange cars motor along dusty roads. Blackbirds fly up from cornfields as mechanical dragonflies settle down and land, and goggled men leap out. Revolutions occur in front of us, but we are blind.

The world is always coming to an End. But we refuse the endings or ignore them, or run out to see if the Flood is coming to cover the Fire That Burns.

I remember when I was very young indeed, all the above was happening. It was a glorious time of collisions, concussions, horn-honkings, and great flowers opening in the sky to drop real men down to land in meadows.

Let's take them, one by one.

When I was about six or seven, in 1926 or 1927, a Pentecostal group in Zion, just a few miles from where I was born in Northern Illinois, predicted that the world was Going To End at Noon Sharp on May 24th.

My brother and I thought this was grand fine lovely news. We had never had a world end before. So we were all joyed up and in sweat. We got up early on the 24th, packed a nine-course lunch, which took the two of us to tote, groaning, across the fields, and went out to sit under a tree on a hill with a fine view for any disasters. We didn't want anything creeping up on us. We wanted to see the whole thing. So we spent from nine in the morning right on through noon, drinking Orange Crush and biting those great sandwiches with the little red devils ground up in them, waiting for THE END.

By late afternoon we had eaten everything in sight, including the circus posters off a nearby barn. We

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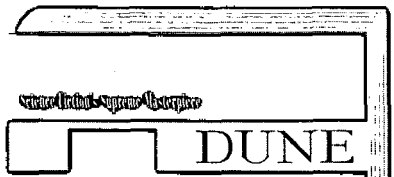

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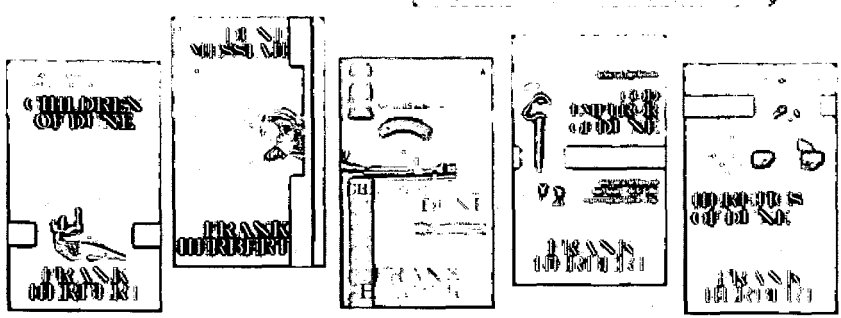

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gave up Ending the World, and started home across a windy meadow. At which moment a Beast came out of the sky.

The Beast had a single motor and two wings and a man inside and it made a huge racket as it touched down and harvested the long grass with its whirling prop while the goggled man looked out at us.

We didn't know we were looking at the end of the world the way it was just before we were born. We thought we had missed everything that day, and there it was right in front of us, and us too dumb to see.

And standing there in the midst of the meadow we could see the dusty cowpath down the way that led into town and on that path a few lonely cars dusting along through 1927 toward a future when there would be nothing but cars and no road. And that was a revolution and an end of a world, too, and we didn't see it, even though we stared and blinked and dropped our jaws at that.

From the slope of the meadow we could look all the way into town and guess the license plates of cars, strange, alien, foreign cars that might have come all the way from Kankakee or Peoria or Rockford or Elgin or even, God knows, Saint Louis.

From this meadow where the strange cloth-and-wood-and-metal Beast rested for a moment, we could see all of the world that we knew, and some that we might guess one day. We could see the edge of town where the trolley stopped, and civilization with it, and where someday soon the trolley would vanish, its blue steel tracks buried beneath asphalt.

From here we could almost see the rivers of pink brick that flowed through our town, inundating our green grass island block, but we couldn't see the vast cement-gulping machines that just next year would seize up the bricks to replace them with concrete.

From here we could see all the gravel roads that led east and west, on which you set out for Sunday excursions as if you were Stanley seeking Livingston, your family Kissel Kar loaded with water bags to be iced by wind and thirty-three miles per hour, extra cans of gasoline strapped on the sides, extra tires everywhere, and extra uncles with large biceps brought along to crank the car when it fell dead, or strike the flat tires with hammers and throw crowbars into far fields in boiling rages.

From here you could see the even farther highways, and try to

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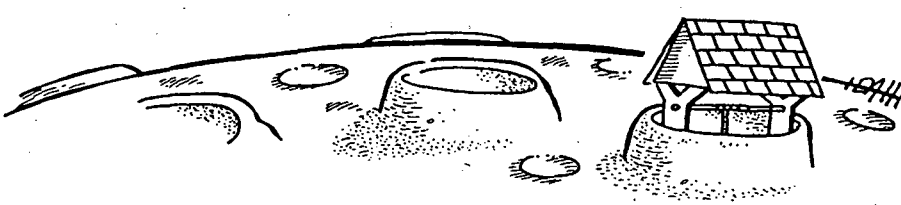
imagine that someday the whole family just might vanish in the night and wake up in orange-smelling California. But along the way live in one-buck-a-night bungalow courts, which is what motels were called in those days. There went the gravel roads that gunshot and ricocheted off the bottom of your car with pebble bullets as you ramshackled toward Oklahoma, there to hit the gumbo, the nice bright-red mud roads steering where Pierce-Arrows capsized and sank in tarpits of sludge, and Fords did swiveling dances from side to side of the slick dance-floor highways before they were seen no more, sinking like primeval beasts into the mud.

And away off over the horizon there the train railway crossings where boys happily counted nine hundred and twenty-two freight cars, boy! nine hundred-twenty-two! while their fathers cut their wrists over the steering wheel and glared at God in His Heaven.

And still further crossings where late Sunday nights, coming home from the mosquito lakes and ponds filled with moonlight, all the kids strewn deadweights in the old Kissel, your grandpa stopped for a last time and ankled in to Spaulding's Corners gas station and ice cream shop and came out to hand in cornucopias of pistachio Arctic treasure that tasted of gas, travel, Time, and Aphrodite's thigh, if you happened to know what Aphrodite was or what a thigh was, or both. And with the ice cream melting in your smile, you slept your way the last miles home, to be carried in by fathers taking you like limp sacrifices to ancient altars.



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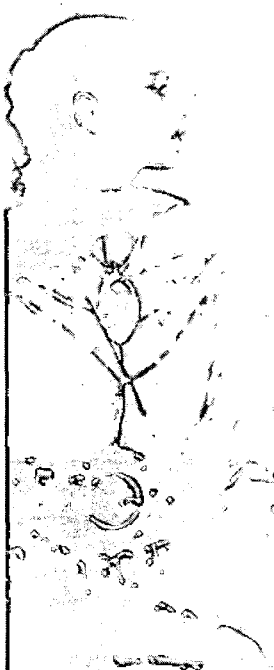

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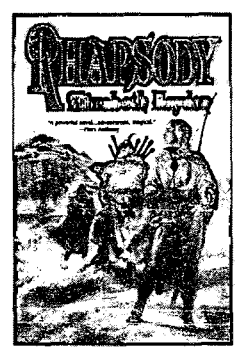

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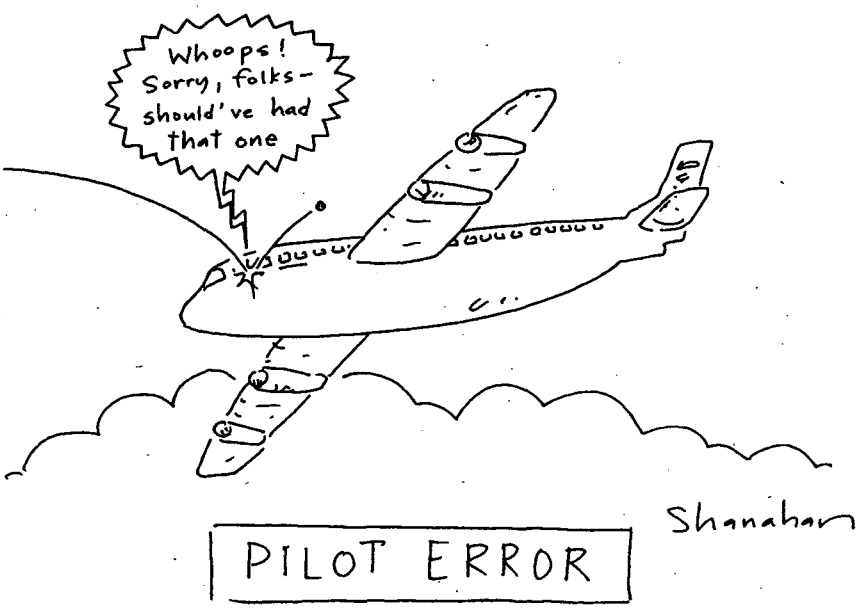
And from here you could see the tiny airport where Sundays, ants leaped out of insects in the sky and on their way down opened their white parasols of silk and yelled along the wind.

All this, from the meadow, my brother and I could see or imagine, yet we saw little and imagined less. If we had seen and known and imagined, we would have called it the time of the beginning of Going Somewhere, one way or another, in the sky or on the gravel-dusted earth. But instead it was the Day we thought the darned Earth didn't end, and the doomsayers were wrong again.

So we walked around the monster, we circled the air-lost Beast in the meadowgrass, and touched it and smelled it, not knowing we were touching Tomorrow, while more of tomorrow banged by on the road below, shaped like Model A's. Without for a moment knowing it, we had been part of a Forever Ending, and dragged home that night in ignorance.

I still remember the hot touch of that airplane engine on my fingers. I still taste the gasoline-pistachio ice cream, and think: I was there the day when the world ended. I was there the day when the world began.



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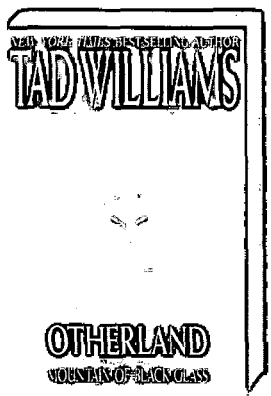

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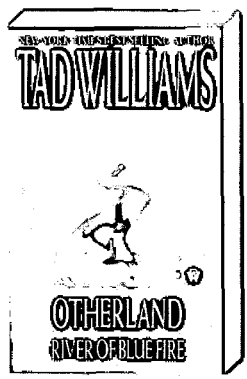

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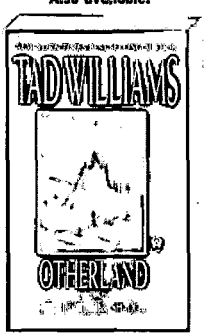

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Since the genre magazines have been such a strong part of the fiction market historically, most sf writers have started out writing short fiction and then moved on to novels. Terry Bisson published three novels, including Fire on the Mountain *and* Talking Man, *before he tried his hand at shorter forms around the end of the 1980s. His first story for us was "The Coon Suit" in our May 1991 issue and he has subsequently contributed an occasional screenplay and a lot of short-shorts, including "Partial People," "The Player," and "Next." Now he shows us a man on a mission.*

macs

By Terry Bisson

WHAT DID I THINK? SAME thing I think today. I thought it was slightly weird even if it was legal. But I guess I agreed with the families that there had to be Closure. Look out that window there. I can guarantee you, it's unusual to be so high in Oklahoma City. Ever since it happened, this town has had a thing about tall buildings. It's almost like that son of a bitch leveled this town.

Hell, we wanted Closure too, but they had a court order all the way from the Supreme Court. I thought it was about politics at first, and I admit I was a little pissed. Don't use the word pissed. What paper did you say you were with?

Never heard of it, but that's me. Anyway, I was miffed — is that a word? miffed? — until I understood it was about Victims' Rights. So we canceled the execution, and built the vats, and you know the rest.

Well, if you want to know the details you should start with my assistant warden at the time, who handled the details. He's now the warden. Tell him I sent you. Give him my regards.

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* * *

I thought it opened a Pandora's box, and I said so at the time. It turns out of course that there haven't been that many, and none on that scale. The ones that there are, we get them all. We're the sort of Sloan-Ketterings of the thing. See that scum on the vats? You're looking at eleven of the guy who abducted the little girls in Ohio, the genital mutilation thing, remember? Even eleven's unusual. We usually build four, maybe five tops. And never anything on the scale of the macs.

Build, grow, whatever. If you're interested in the technology, you'll have to talk with the vat vet himself. That's what we call him, he's a good old boy. He came in from the ag school for the macs and he's been here in Corrections ever since. He was an exchange student, but he met a girl from MacAlester and never went home. Isn't it funny how that stuff works? She was my second cousin, so now I have a Hindu second cousin-in-law. Of course he's not actually a Hindu.

A Unitarian, actually. There are several of us here in MacAlester, but I'm the only one from the prison. I was fresh out of Ag and it was my first assignment. How would one describe such an assignment? In my country, we had no such...well, you know. It was repellent and fascinating at the same time.

Everyone has the cloning technology. It's the growth rate that gives difficulty. Animals grow to maturity so much faster, and we had done significant work. Six-week cattle, ten-day ducks. Gene tweaking. Enzyme accelerators. They wanted full-grown macs in two and a half years; we gave them 168 thirty-year-old men in eleven months! I used to come down here and watch them grow. Don't tell anyone, especially my wife, Jean, but I grew sort of fond of them.

Hard? It was hard, I suppose, but farming is hard too if you think about it. A farmer may love his hogs but he ships them off, and we all know what for.

You should ask legal services about that. That wasn't part of my operation. We had already grown 168 and I had to destroy one before he was even big enough to walk, just so they could include the real one. Ask me if I appreciated that!

* * *

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It was a second court order. It came through after the macs were in the vats. Somebody's bright idea in Justice. I suppose they figured it would legitimize the whole operation to include the real McCoy, so to speak, but then somebody has to decide who gets him. Justice didn't want any part of that and neither did we, so we brought in one of those outfits that run lotteries, because that's what it was, a lottery, but kind of a strange one, if you know what I mean.

Strange in that the winner wasn't supposed to know if he won or not. He or she. It's like the firing squad, where nobody knows who has the live bullets. Nobody is supposed to know who gets the real one. I'm sure it's in the records somewhere, but that stuff's all sealed. What magazine did you say you were with?

Sealed? It's destroyed. That was part of the contract. I guess whoever numbered the macs would know, but that was five years ago and it was done by lot anyway. It could probably be figured out by talking to the drivers who did the deliveries, or the drivers who picked up the remains, or even the families themselves. But it would be illegal, wouldn't it? Unethical, too, if you ask me, since it would interfere with what the whole thing was about, which was Closure. Victims' Rights. That's why we were hired, to keep it secret, and that's what we did. End of story.

UPS was a natural because we had just acquired Con Tran and were about to go into the detainee delivery business under contract with the BOP. The macs were mostly local, of course, but not all. Several went out of state; two to California, for example. It wasn't a security problem since the macs were all sort of docile. I figured they were engineered that way. Is engineered the word? Anyway, the problem was public relations. Appearances, to be frank. You can't drive around with a busload of macs. And most families don't want the TV and papers at the door, like Publishers Clearing House. (Though some do!) So we delivered them in vans, two and three at a time, mostly in the morning, sort of on the sly. We told the press we were still working out the details until it was all done. Some people videotaped their delivery. I suspect they're the ones that also videotaped their executions.

I'm not one of those who had a problem with the whole thing. No

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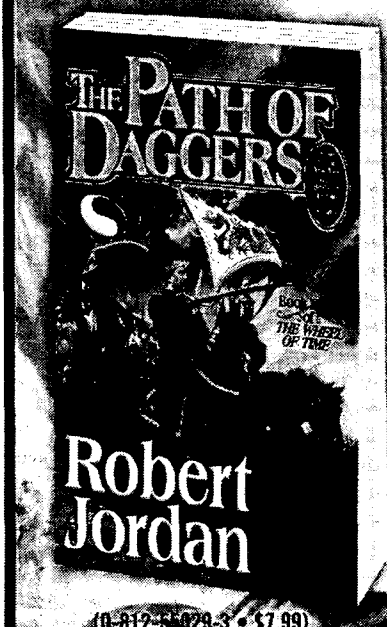

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sirree. I went along with my drivers, at first especially, and met quite a few of the loved ones, and I wish you could have seen the grateful expressions on their faces. You get your own mac to kill any way you want to. That's Closure. It made me proud to be an American even though it came out of a terrible tragedy. An unspeakable tragedy.

Talk to the drivers all you want to. What channel did you say you were with?

You wouldn't have believed the publicity at the time. It was a big triumph for Victims' Rights, which is now in the Constitution, isn't it? Maybe I'm wrong. Anyway, it wasn't a particularly what you might call pleasant job, even though I was all for the families and Closure and stuff and still am.

Looked like anybody. Looked like you except for the beard. None of them were different. They were all the same. One of them was supposedly the real McCoy, but so what? Isn't the whole point of cloning supposed to be that each one is the same as the first one? Nobody's ever brought this up before. You're not from one of those talk shows, are you?

They couldn't have talked to us if they had wanted to, and we weren't about to talk to them. They were all taped up except for the eyes, and you should have seen those eyes. You tried to avoid it. I had one that threw up all over my truck even though theoretically you can't throw up through that tape. I told the dispatcher my truck needed a theoretical cleaning.

They all seemed the same to me. Sort of panicked and gloomy. I had a hard time hating them, in spite of what they done, or their daddy done, or however you want to put it. They say they could only live five years anyway before their insides turned to mush. That was no problem of course. Under the Victims' Rights settlement it had to be done in thirty days, that was from date of delivery.

I delivered thirty-four macs, of 168 altogether. I met thirty-four fine families, and they were a fine cross-section of American life, black and white, Catholic and Protestant. Not so many Jews.

I've heard that rumor. You're going to have rumors like that when one of them is supposedly the real McCoy. There were other rumors too, like that one of the macs was pardoned by its family and sent away to school

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somewhere. That would have been hard. I mean, if you got a mac you had to return a body within thirty days. One story I heard was that they switched bodies after a car wreck. Another was that they burned another body at the stake and turned it in. But that one's hard to believe too. Only one of the macs was burned at the stake, and they had to get a special clearance to do that. Hell, you can't even burn leaves in Oklahoma anymore.

SaniMed collected, they're a medical waste outfit; since we're not allowed to handle remains. They're not going to be able to tell you much. What did they pick up? Bones and ashes. Meat.

Some of it was pretty gruesome but in this business you get used to that. We weren't supposed to have to bag them, but you know how it is. The only one that really got to me was the crucifixion. That sent the wrong message, if you ask me.

There was no way we could tell which one of them was the real McCoy, not from what we picked up. You should talk to the loved ones. Nice people, maybe a little impatient sometimes. The third week was the hardest in terms of scheduling. People had been looking forward to Closure for so long, they played with their macs for a week or so, but then it got old. Played is not the word, but you know what I mean. Then it's bang bang and honey call SaniMed. They want them out of the house ASAP.

It's not that we were slow, but the schedule was heavy. In terms of what we were picking up, none of it was that hard for me. These were not people. Some of them were pretty chewed up. Some of them were chewed up pretty bad.

I'm not allowed to discuss individual families. I can say this: the ceremony, the settlement, the execution, whatever you want to call it, wasn't always exactly what everybody had expected or wanted. One family even wanted to let their mac go. Since they couldn't do that, they wanted a funeral. A funeral for toxic waste!

I can't give you their name or tell you their number.

I guess I can tell you that. It was between 103 and 105.

I'm not ashamed of it. We're Christians. Forgive us our trespasses as

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we forgive those who trespass against us. We tried to make it legal, but the state wouldn't hear of it, since the execution order had already been signed. We had thirty days, so we waited till the last week and then used one of those Kevorkian kits, the lethal objection thing. Injection, I mean. The doctor came with it but we had to push the plunger thing. It seems to me like one of the rights of Victims' Rights should be — but I guess not.

There was a rumor that another family forgave and got away with it, but we never met them. They supposedly switched bodies in a car wreck and sent their mac to forestry school in Canada. Even if it was true, which I doubt, he would be almost five now, and that's half their life span. Supposedly their internal organs harden after ten years. What agency did you say you were with?

We dropped ours out of an airplane. My uncle has a big ranch out past Mayfield with his own airstrip and everything. Cessna 172. It was illegal, but what are they going to do? C'est la vie, or rather c'est la mort. Or whatever.

They made us kill him. Wasn't he ours to do with as we liked? Wasn't that the idea? He killed my daddy like a dog and if I wanted to tie him up like a dog, isn't that my business? Aren't you a little long in the tooth to be in college, boy?

An electric chair. It's out in the garage. Want to see it? Still got the shit stain on the seat.

My daddy came home with a mac, and took my mother and me out back and made us watch while he shot him. Shot him all over, from the feet up. The whole thing took ten minutes. It didn't seem to do anybody any good, my aunt is still dead. They never found most of her, only the bottom of a leg. Would you like some chocolates? They're from England.

Era? It was only like five years ago. I never took delivery. I thought I was the only one but I found out later there were eight others. I guess they just put them back in the vat. They couldn't live more than five years anyway. Their insides turned hard. All their DNA switches were shut off or something.

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I got my own Closure my own way. That's my daughter's picture there. As for the macs, they are all dead. Period. They lived a while, suffered and died. Is it any different for the rest of us? What church did you say you were with?

I don't mind telling you our real name, but you should call us 49 if you quote us. That's the number we had in the lottery. We got our mac on a Wednesday, kept him for a week, then set him in a kitchen chair and shot him in the head. We didn't have any idea how messy that would be. The state should have given some instructions or guidelines.

Nobody knew which one was the original, and that's the way it should be. Otherwise it would ruin the Closure for everybody else. I can tell you ours wasn't, though. It was just a feeling I had. That's why we just shot him and got it over with. I just couldn't get real excited about killing something that seemed barely alive, even though it supposedly had all his feelings and memories. But some people got into it and attended several executions. They had a kind of network.

Let me see your list. These two are the ones I would definitely talk to: 112 and 43. And maybe 13.

Is that what they call us, 112? So I'm just a number again. I thought I was through with that in the army. I figured we had the real one, the real McCoy, because he was so hard to kill. We cut him up with a chain saw, a little Homelite. No sir, I didn't mind the mess and yes, he hated every minute of it. All twenty some odd which is how long it took. I would have fed him to my dogs if we hadn't had to turn the body in. End of fucking story.

Oh, yeah. Double the pleasure, double the fun. Triple it, really. The only one I was against was this one, 61. The crucifixion. I think that sent the wrong message, but the neighbors loved it.

Drown in the toilet was big. Poison, fire, hanging, you name it. People got these old books from the library but that medieval stuff took special equipment. One guy had a rack built but the neigbors objected to the screaming. I guess there are some limits, even to Victims' Rights. Ditto the stake stuff.

* * *

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I'm sure our mac wasn't the real McCoy. You want to know why? He was so quiet and sad. He just closed his eyes and died. I'm sure the real one would have been harder to kill. My mac wasn't innocent, but he wasn't guilty either. Even though he looked like a thirty-year-old man he was only eighteen months old, and that sort of showed.

I killed him just to even things out. Not revenge, just Closure. After spending all the money on the court case and the settlement, not to mention the cloning and all, the deliveries, it would have been wasteful not to do it, don't you think?

I've heard that surviving thing but it's just a rumor. Like Elvis. There were lots of rumors. They say one family tried to pardon their mac and send him to Canada or somewhere. I don't think so!

You might try this one, 43. They used to brag that they had the real one. I don't mind telling you I resented that and still do, since we were supposed to all share equally in the Closure. But some people have to be number one.

It's over now anyway. What law firm did you say you worked for?

I could tell he was the original by the mean look in his eye. He wasn't quite so mean after a week in that rat box.

Some people will always protest and write letters and such. But what about something that was born to be put to death? How can you protest that?

Closure, that's what it was all about. I went on to live my life. I've been married again and divorced already. What college did you say you were from?

The real McCoy? I think he just kept his mouth shut and died like the rest of them. What's he goin' to say, here I am, and make it worse? And as far as that rumor of him surviving, you can file it under Elvis.

There was also a story that somebody switched bodies after a car wreck and sent their mac to Canada. I wouldn't put too much stock in that one, either. Folks around here don't even think about Canada. Forgiveness either.

We used that state kit, the Kevorkian thing. I heard about twenty families did. We just sat him down and May pushed the plunger. Like flushing a toilet. May and myself — she's gone now, God bless her — we were interested in Closure, not revenge.

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* * *

This one, 13, told me one time he thought he had the real McCoy, but it was wishful thinking, if you ask me. I don't think you could tell the real one. I don't think you should want to even if you could.

I'm afraid you can't ask him about it, because they were all killed in a fire, the whole family. It was just a day before the ceremony they had planned, which was some sort of slow thing with wires. There was a gas leak or something. They were all killed and their mac was destroyed in the explosion. Fire and explosion. What insurance company did you say you worked for?

It was — have you got a map? oooh, that's a nice one — right here. On the corner of Oak and Increase, only a half a mile from the site of the original explosion, ironically. The house is gone now.

See that new strip mall? That Dollar Store's where the house stood. The family that lived in it was one of the ones that lost a loved one in the Oklahoma City bombing. They got one of the macs as part of the Victims' Rights Closure Settlement, but unfortunately tragedy struck them again before they got to get Closure. Funny how the Lord works in mysterious ways.

No, none of them are left. There was a homeless guy who used to hang around but the police ran him off. Beard like yours. Might have been a friend of the family, some crazy cousin, who knows. So much tragedy they had. Now he lives in the back of the mall in a dumpster.

There. That yellow thing. It never gets emptied. I don't know why the city doesn't remove it but it's been there for almost five years just like that.

I wouldn't go over there. People don't fool with him. He doesn't bother anybody, but, you know.

Suit yourself. If you knock on it he'll come out, figuring you've got some food for him or something. Kids do it for meanness sometimes. But stand back, there is a smell.

"Daddy?"

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

A Red Heart of Memories, by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Ace Books, October 1999, $21.95

EVERYTHING has spirit; I don't find that hard to accept. But what if all those spirits were also sentient and you could talk to them? And they could answer? That's how it works for Matilda "Matt" Black, the disarming, matter-of-fact, and whimsically minded protagonist of Nina Kiriki Hoffman's latest novel.

When the book opens, Matt is drifting through life, living like a street person, albeit one who really can have conversations with inanimate, manmade objects. Then she meets Edmund, a handsome young man who steps out of a wall.

Edmund follows what he calls spirit, fixing things that need to be fixed. In the case of the wall, he had become a part of it for a while in order to let the weakened, crumbling stone grow strong again. Now he says he's willing to help Matt, except it turns out that Edmund's the one who needs help. They're both damaged goods, but Edmund's problems seem more immediate. He has been cut off from his past by some terrible incident that he can't remember.

The pair embark on a journey to meet with the people Edmund knew before that traumatic incident took place. The first old friend turns out to be a ghost, and things get only more mysterious and charming from there on out, what with talking cars and houses, not to mention sentient, malleable magic that first appears like liquid gold and then takes on a personality of its own.

Hoffman addresses serious concerns here — abuse, lack of self-worth, the need for companionship — but she never gets preachy. The journey, even through its darkest elements, is leavened by Matt's irrepressible character — that wonderful mix of pure common sense

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and whimsy that I mentioned earlier.

How it all turns out, you'll have to read for yourself, but it's worth joining this pair for their journey of remembrance and self-discovery. Hoffman has a delightful writing style, a deceptively simple approach to her prose that's immediately accessible, but no less resonant for that. And while her characters are far more able to forgive than I ever could, that probably says more about me than it does them.

Highly recommended.

The Ballad of Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan, by William Sanders, Yandro House, January 1999, $25.00/$15.00

Sometimes my own ignorance appalls me. According to the cover copy, this is Sanders's sixteenth book. He's been a finalist for the Nebula, the Hugo, and the Campbell. So it's obvious that he's been working in the sf/f field for some time now, doing work that's well thought of. But until this novel, which only came into my hands by the happenstance of this magazine's editor thinking I might like it, I didn't know his work at all.

Now there are lots of writers in the field that I haven't read (or heard of, for that matter) but this book is just so damned good, I can't understand how I could possibly have overlooked Sanders's work before. It has everything I love about a book:

Great characters, for one thing, from the title characters, Billy Badwater, a Cherokee veteran, and his paramour Janna Turanova, a Kazakhstanian researcher visiting the U.S. on a visa, to Billy's dead grandfather who talks to him using the shape of various animals, and even images from the TV screen. All the characters are well-developed and interesting, and the Natives, happily, are treated like individuals, rather than elevated to icon status, or otherwise stereotyped.

Multiple plots, all of them fascinating. My favorite is the relationship between Billy and Janna, how they meet, fall in love, and try to keep the immigration authorities from shipping her back to Russia. And wrapped up in that is Billy's coming to terms with his place in the world, dealing with poverty, racism, and other ills. But there are also plotlines involving a serious exploration into the dangers of dumped nuclear radiation, parallels shown between how world governments treat their indigenous people, not to mention a really

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bizarre monster that's going to swallow the world if Billy doesn't do something about it.

Sanders's prose and dialogue is wry, and funny, and serious, and gripping. The book swallows you whole from the first page when Billy's grandfather talks to him through the body of a blue jay, and it doesn't let you go until the end, with not a wasted page in between. Rather, there's a wealth of intriguing incident and story, character and interaction, high flights of fancy and down-to-Earth horrors.

And the best thing is, if you end up loving this novel as much as I did, there are another fifteen backlist titles for you to go tracking down.

If your local bookstore can't get this for you, you can order a copy at 1-888-795-4274, or on the Internet, go to: <http://members.tripod.com/~wingedfrog/bbrt.html>.

Flyboy Action Figure Comes with Gasmask, by Jim Munroe, HarperFlamingo Canada, 1998, Cdn$20.00

Twenty-two-year-old Ryan lives in Toronto. He's a student and a virgin, addicted to coffee, fascinated by bugs, and he has a huge crush on Cassandra, the waitress at Sok, a local greasy spoon. Much to his surprise, Cass turns out to be interested in him as well, and they soon exchange secrets: she claims that her daughter Jessica's father was an alien, whereupon Ryan reveals that he can turn into a house fly, and proceeds to prove it.

But Cass has more going for her than a "spaceman impregnated her" story. She used to play in a punk band, but is now a single mother, determined to raise her daughter as best as she is able. Oh, and she can make things disappear. Where they go to, she has no idea, but they're gone forever.

And so is born the dynamic duo of Flyboy and Ms. Place, the Superheroes for Social Justice. Inspired by comic books and the exploits of Sailor Moon, they decide to combat evil, setting their sights on attainable goals as they take on tobacco companies, the local right-wing tabloid newspaper, and other contemporary adversaries.

Now I know the above sounds kind of goofy, especially when you consider Ryan's "super power": being able to turn into a fly. What kind of an ability is that? What self-respecting hero would admit to it?

But while all those elements are certainly a part of Jim Munroe's

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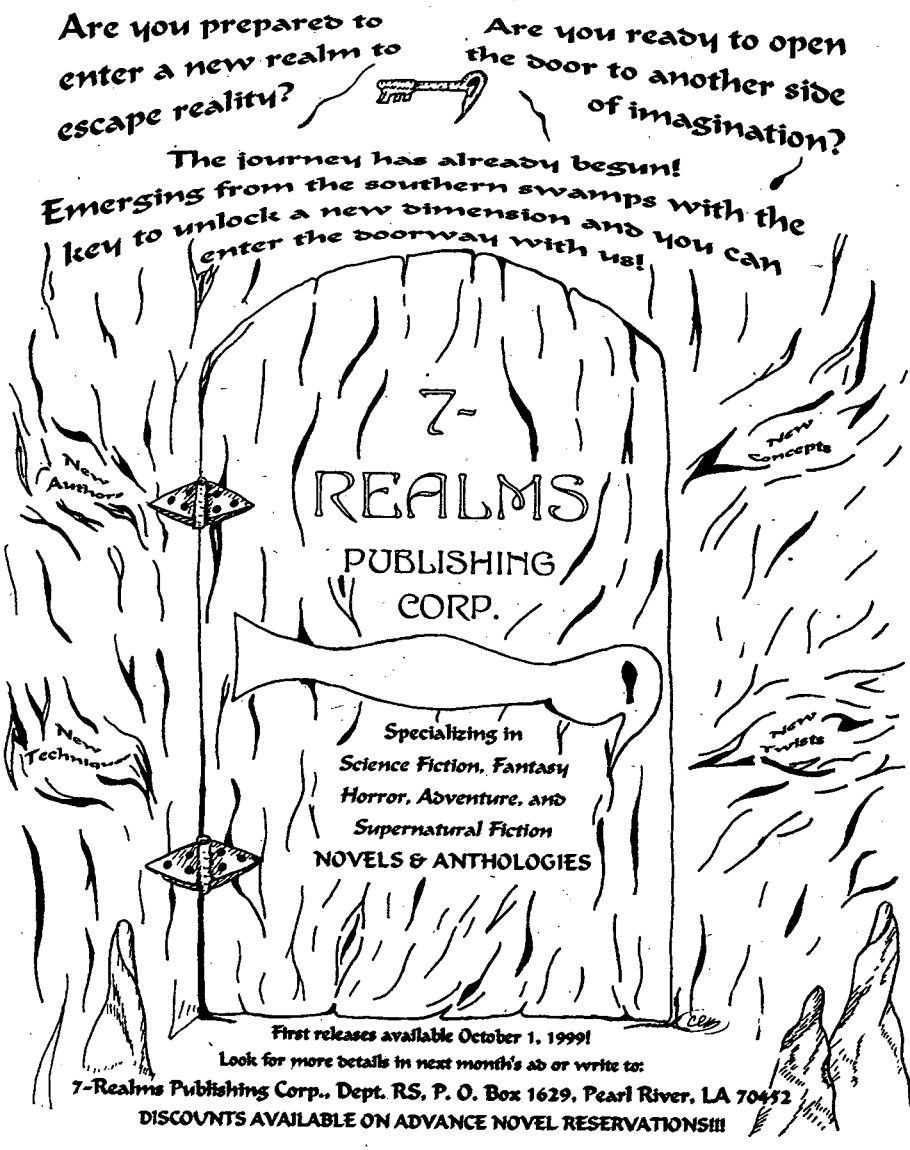
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novel, *Flyboy Action Figure Comes with Gasmask* is much more than a spoof on superheroes and comics. In fact, while the characters are rather self-effacing about the whole business themselves, they do take their battles very seriously. But the real focus of the book, or at least another primary one beyond the superheroics, are the characters, the growth and maturing of their relationship, the wonderful insights Munroe brings to modern culture and the alternative scene of social politics, indie rockers and poets, clubbers and the like.

The cast — not only Ryan and Cass, but their community of friends and hangers-on — is terrific, and their real-life trials are as absorbing as their "battles against the forces of evil." Ryan's first-person point of view perfectly captures a balance of enthusiasm, vulnerability, irony, and bravado. In short, it's the voice of a young man to whom the world is opening up to be both a more wonderful place than he imagined it could be, and one more dangerous and melancholy. And the fact that, without explaining or justifying anything, Munroe manages to make the silly idea of a man turning into a fly not only plausible, but something we care about, is all to his credit.

With the wonder of the Internet, readers outside of Canada can readily order copies from http://www.chaptersglobe.com or wait for the forthcoming U.S. edition.

Chocolat, by Joanne Harris, Viking Penguin, 1999, $22.95

Vianne Rocher and her young daughter Anouk arrive at the small French village of Lansquenet in the middle of a February carnival. Having spent her whole life traveling from place to place, first with her mother, now with her own daughter, Vianne wants nothing so much as a place to settle down and live a more ordered life. So she comes to Lansquenet and opens a chocolate shop, a rather mad act, one would think, in a village so small that already boasts a café and bakery.

But Vianne has a gift, the ability to know exactly what chocolate her customer loves best, and an innate perceptiveness that allows her to understand and offer a cure for what troubles a person most. They are small magics, part of many that have filled her life, from her mother's premonitions, charms and other little spells, to her daughter's invisible companions who can sometimes be seen by others.

Initially, the villagers resist this

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stranger in their midst, but she soon wins many of them over with both her chocolates and her free spirit. But those same drawing points earn her the enmity of others in the village, in particular the curé of the church that's directly across the square from her shop. Vianne and Father Reynaud both have secret pasts that could be damaging if revealed, to themselves as well as others, and if they keep on their antagonistic course, it could mean disaster for many.

Now some of the characters first appear to fit too much to type, especially the suspicious curé and his "Bible groupies," but on the whole, the reader is won over by the sheer charm of Vianne and her new friends: shy Guillaume, whose only companion is an aging dog; cantankerous Armande and her grandson Luc; Joséphine, whose shoplifting hides a deeper ill; and the river people — dangerous Gypsies, so far as the curé is concerned, but closer in spirit to Vianne than any of the villagers.

Harris's prose is an absolute delight. The novel is set in contemporary France, but she has written it in such a way that it has a timeless quality and could almost be set anywhen. Running under it all is a deep and pleasing sensuality, from descriptions of the locales and the relationships of the characters to the chocolates and the great feast at the end of the book. And while Father Reynaud's presence, and the sections from his point of view, lend somewhat of a menacing tone throughout, Vianne's sections ably counteract that with a great feeling of mystery, warmth, and comfort.

For a touchstone, consider Laura Esquival's *Like Water for Chocolate*, but with a European rather than a Latin flavor.

Highly recommended and worth many rereadings.

Eyes of Prey, by Barry Hoffman, Leisure, September 1999, $5.50

Barry Hoffman can really tell a story. Bringing back characters from *Hungry Eyes*, he again explores the ramifications of vigilante justice in a way that satisfies both the reader looking for vicarious thrills, and the one who likes to be made to think a little when reading a thriller.

This time the central character is a dancer at a strip club who, after foiling a subway molester, decides to "take back the night." She's doing it for herself, but her stand against crime soon becomes a rallying point

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for the citizens of Philadelphia. We follow what happens from her viewpoint as well as those of the pursuing police, reporters, and others who become involved. The way their lives intersect, as well as their motivations for being who they are and why they do what they do, make for fascinating reading.

There are a few fantastic touches as well, some so subtle they aren't revealed until the end, and it's to Hoffman's credit that they fit seamlessly into what would otherwise be a gritty crime novel.

But while the characters are well-developed and fascinating, occasionally the large cast seems a little out of control, just as the prose isn't always as polished as one might hope for. At those points it's Hoffman's enthusiasm for his work, and his heartfelt belief in what he's writing, that carries the reader through. Still, once you begin this novel, I'm guessing that, just as it happened with me, you won't be able to put it down until it's done.

Science Fiction Magazine Story Index, 1926-1995, by Terry A. Murray, McFarland & Co., 1999, $65

This is a definite must for any serious sf/f bibliophile or library. It features a complete listing of all the stories that have appeared in the pulps and newsstand magazines from 1926 through to 1995, from the classics like *Weird Tales* through to more contemporary titles such as *Realms of Fantasy*.

The main body of the text is alphabetically divided up by magazine, with the title and author for each story listed by issue. There are also comprehensive indices of story titles and authors in the back. So now if you want to track down that elusive story, or to see what your favorite author has published in the magazines over the years, there's an easy place to turn to.

While it's certainly not for the casual reader, I'm sure it will prove indispensable for scholars and collectors.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THESE are challenging times for the magazine business. Newsstand distribution and sales continue to drop. Readers are less responsive to direct mail subscription offers. And the competition for your time from cable TV and the Web is a concern.

Magazines will no doubt survive, but I think we will have to change. In the near future, perhaps we will publish fewer, bigger issues; in the far future, F&SF may come to you in some electronic form.

In his editorial, Gordon Van Gelder said that we have every intention of sticking around well into the next century. I think that he is right and that we will continue to survive and perhaps even prosper. First, because the magazine is in strong editorial hands, and second, because the product, that is, the *stories*, are just as good as they've ever been, maybe better. The evidence for that is the issue you hold in your hands, which I believe is the best issue of new fiction F&SF has ever published.

–Edward L. Ferman

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Books

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

The Age of Spiritual Machines, by Ray Kurzweil, Viking, 1999, $25.95

Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind, by Hans Moravec, Oxford, 1999, $25

Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipeds!, by Arthur C. Clarke, St. Martin's Press, 1999, $35

EVERY NOW and then I indulge myself in a depressing little calculation: How many books will I be able to read during my lifetime? Even at a book every single day — over an adult reading life of, say, 60 years — I'd only cover about 22,000 volumes. Not so bad, I guess — if I could really keep up such a pace. Most of the time I'm hard put to read an entire book every two or three days, though, particularly if it's something more than fluff. At an average pace of one book every three days, I'd read about 7,000 books in all. But sometimes I get so busy that I don't finish a whole book in a *week*.... So, in the four or five decades which, if I'm lucky, remain to me, I'm not likely to cover more than another 4,000 or 5,000 books — total.

Viewed from that perspective, the future — my personal future, anyway — looks disturbingly short. It's rather unsettling. And I got a very similar feeling from reading Ray Kurzweil's *The Age of Spiritual Machines* and Hans Moravec's *Robot*.

I didn't expect to have this response. These are two books I thought would invigorate and inspire me. They're like nonfiction sf, futuristic speculations by two of the leading lights of the artificial intelligence community. Kurzweil is the inventor of a variety of amazing devices, most notably the OCR (optical character recognition) software that scans typed, printed, and handwritten text. If you've ever used

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a flatbed scanner, you've encountered Kurzweil's handiwork. Moravec, meanwhile, has been involved in some of the most intriguing efforts in robotics over the past thirty years, particularly a series of attempts — remarkably successful, as he describes them in *Robot* — to give mechanical devices the ability to see and navigate through the world by themselves. (Most recently, these projects resulted in an AI-guided van that drove from coast to coast, in direct command more than 98 percent of the time.)

I've been a champion of AI as long as I can remember. I cheered Deep Blue on when it defeated chess master Gary Kasparov. I've vigorously debated anyone who denied the basic feasibility of machine minds, and I've been exhilarated by the advancements in the field which have come with the explosion in computing power and memory over the past decade. So I opened *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, a follow-up to Kurzweil's 1990 book *The Age of Intelligent Machines*, with nothing but eager anticipation.

I was not disappointed — at least not in the sense I might have feared. Kurzweil is anything but conservative in his predictions for AI over the next 100 years. First, he assures us, a computer with the full computing capacity of the human brain will be available for a mere $1,000 as soon as 2019. With that power, and continuing improvements in brain scanning techniques such as magnetic resonance imaging, Kurzweil says a machine with the full mental capacities of human beings — the first full AI — will appear by 2029. And that's just the beginning. All this computer power and complete knowledge of the brain's architecture and functions will allow individual humans to upload their minds into the growing global network, to live essentially forever among the amazing machine minds that will have evolved there. Nanotechnology (you've all heard of that, I trust) will provide these minds — human and machine — with clouds of microscopic nanobots they can assemble into whatever sorts of mobile bodies they desire. By 2099, Kurzweil says, the majority of people will have made the leap into virtual immortality, and even the few holdouts will probably be heavily modified with neural implants and other add-ons.

No one can hope to be very specific about the technologies of a hundred years from now, and Kurzweil's predictions beyond the next couple of decades remain consequently

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vague. What will the world look like if his suggestions are anywhere near the truth? What will these future minds be like, given the huge additions of speed and memory they'll have to work with? Kurzweil offers only the barest of hints. Most of these come in sections of imaginary dialogue at the end of each chapter. In these, he questions a citizen of this future world (dubbed Molly) at its various stages of development. She tells him about her first reactions to AI, her doubts about leaving her familiar flesh for the virtual world of the net, and her subsequent evolution into something only vaguely resembling what we think of as a human mind. (Indeed, in the final chapter, it's clear that she's holding converse with Kurzweil using a tiny fraction of her larger self, and severely modifying her expressions and assumptions in order to make herself comprehensible. She can simulate an old-style human personality, but she is one no longer.)

Much of Kurzweil's material — nanotechnology, uploaded minds, virtual reality — will be familiar to sf readers. But there are some ideas that haven't been much treated in fiction yet (quantum computing, evolutionary algorithms, etc.), and Kurzweil's discussion of these concepts offers just the kind of sfnal kick I had expected. (Reading about quantum-computing researchers using a cup of hot coffee as their computing medium, I couldn't help but think of wizards scrying the future in a bowl of water. Arthur C. Clarke's famous dictum concerning advanced technology and magic strikes again.)

The Age of Spiritual Machines claims a closer relationship to reality than most sf, however. Kurzweil works like a draft horse during the opening chapters to convince us that this is not a book of wild imagination, rooted only loosely in the trends and concerns of today, but a plausible (perhaps even inevitable) extrapolation from processes going on right now. And he gives us some good reasons to believe him. His record of prediction over a ten-year period (based on speculations from *The Age of Intelligent Machines)* is remarkable, particularly compared to the success rates of other futurists. Simple math backs up his earliest assertions — unless something drastic and unlikely happens, I'll bet we do have $1,000 computers with the processing and memory capacity of the human brain within twenty years. Kurzweil admits that his speculations further down the line may well be off in the details —

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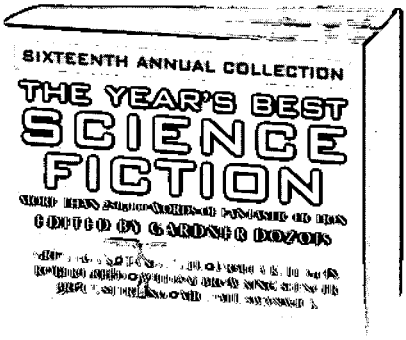

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perhaps the first full AI will arrive in 2032 instead of 2029 — but on the larger points, he's absolutely sure, and it's hard to argue with him.

Hard, but not impossible. For all his marshaling of trends, I think Kurzweil underestimates the difficulty of certain aspects of his scenario. Computing power may grow at the speed he suggests, but will the reverse-engineering of the brain keep pace? Will nanotechnology ever really produce the wonders that he foresees? Sf readers have been down Disappointment Road before. Weren't we supposed to be vacationing on the Moon by now? The study of the brain may prove as difficult as the construction of a grand unified theory in physics, and nanotechnology may be as impossible (at least in the short term) as interstellar travel. That would put a major crimp in Kurzweil's future.

Worse, perhaps, is Kurzweil's near-total avoidance of social and economic issues. How much will it cost to upload oneself into the virtual world, and who will be able to afford it? He devotes some attention to the inevitable antitechnological reactions these developments will occasion, but socioeconomic factors will likely have a much greater impact on the deployment of intelligent machines and virtual reality in the next century. There's already a huge gap between the technologies available to wealthy Americans and impoverished Ecuadorians, for example. It'll only get worse as computing power explodes exponentially.

But the most critical issue Kurzweil overlooks is the inevitable question "Why would we want to?" He relies rather too heavily on arguments of inevitability, and assumes too easily the appeal of his imagined technologies. It won't be just neo-Luddites balking at a virtual existence — lots of people will find that uploading prospect much too adventurous. (All the more so if the nanotech lags behind, and there are no mobile bodies for a machine mind to inhabit.) Kurzweil gives too little credit to the power of human choice in the face of technological developments. Some applications may be inevitable, given the insatiable curiosity of our species, but the widespread distribution of machine intelligences or uploaded communities can't be taken for granted. Perhaps they'll never be anything more than a footnote.

Some similar problems crop up in Hans Moravec's *Robot*, which takes off from assumptions much

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like Kurzweil's. Moravec puts off the arrival of machines with human-level intelligence until 2050, largely because he believes that intelligent machines will also need to reproduce the locomotive and manipulative abilities of human beings in the physical world. (Hence his title.) This may be due to his long-standing involvement in robotics research — in other words, it could be tunnel vision — but his arguments suggest that the abilities of robots to assist us in the physical environment will be a crucial factor in the economic and social acceptance of intelligent machines. He recognizes that for machine intelligence to become more than a laboratory curiosity it will have to be of some practical *use*.

Moravec's got a point. It's much easier to imagine the development of machine minds out of a series of intermediate steps. And so *Robot* updates some familiar predictions, such as robot house cleaners, robot cars, robot factories, etc. Moravec brings more hard experience to his speculations than Kurzweil — he never underestimates the challenges of creating machines with even marginally intelligent real-world functionality. Reading these predictions from someone who has dedicated his career to issues such as machine vision and robot navigation makes it much easier to accept at least the technical feasibility of Moravec's future.

Moravec's far-future speculations, however, are much more radical — and worrisome — than Kurzweil's. Once we've developed robots of sufficient ability, they'll begin to make improvements to themselves. (Even now, he points out, chip designers rely heavily on computer technology in designing the next generation of computer parts.) An explosion will ensue. Machines will become rapidly more intelligent and capable than humans. They'll be able to maintain civilization all on their own with a tiny fraction of their attentions, and they'll inevitably turn their superminds in other directions. They'll venture out into the solar system, and later the larger cosmos, a giant "bubble" of Mind that will eventually consume the entire universe.

Obviously Moravec doesn't think this will happen by next year. But once our machines reach that critical point, subsequent developments will occur quite rapidly. The question, of course, is what becomes of us? And that's where *Robot* presents its greatest challenge to the reader. As many sf writers have speculated over the years, Moravec

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thinks intelligent machines may well replace their human creators. And the idea seems not to bother him at all.

"Rather quickly, they could displace us from existence," Moravec writes. "I'm not as alarmed as many by the latter possibility..." His sanguinity derives in part from his belief that our superintelligent successors will treat their forebears gently, allowing us to live out our lives on a peaceful, depopulated, ecologically balanced Earth. And even if the machines' interests become "incompatible with old Earth's continued existence," Moravec assures us that the machines will preserve us "in some form." Most of all, though, what spares Moravec any pangs of regret for humanity's passing is the belief that these machines are like our children, not genetically but culturally. What pain should there be in bequeathing the planet and the universe to our "mind children"?

To my own surprise, I found myself really struggling with the idea. The cool, rational part of me followed Moravec's arguments and agreed, in principle. But, just as specifying the number of books remaining to me brings on a surge of existential panic, so Moravec's future (and, to a lesser extent, Kurzweil's) aroused in me a powerful resistance. No moon colonies? No Mars bases? No warp drive and humanity spreading out into the galaxy? Though I know that I won't live to see that anyway, I find it hard to accept a future in which if *anyone* were to boldly go *anywhere*, it certainly wouldn't be us, feeble biological beings that we are.

Is this just sentimentality, a nostalgia for a future that can never be? Or is there some better justification for opposing our own extinction? I've been pondering this question ever since I finished *Robot*, and I'm still not sure. But I lean toward the latter position. No species should accept extinction without a fight, and no more should we give up our dreams of the stars.

I'm hardly alone in this opinion. Sf has frequently confronted similar scenarios and almost invariably come down in favor of battling for survival rather than simply rolling over. Think of Fred Saberhagen's Berserker series, or (more recently) Linda Nagata's *Vast*. In film, there's *The Terminator* and *Matrix*. Even sf novels that accept the notion of a future cosmos devoured by machine intelligence — in which we might live, if at all, as simulations running in some corner of the cosmic Mind — seek

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some measure of dignity and meaning for our future selves. (Robert Charles Wilson's *Darwinia*, which I reviewed here some months ago, attempts exactly this.) I don't think we'll give up hope quite so easily as Moravec expects.

Ultimately Moravec's book is vulnerable to the same question Kurzweil's was: Why would we ever choose a future like this? Perhaps we'll choose not to build these ever-so-helpful robots. (Perhaps Moravec's own book will plant the seeds of mistrust.) And, even if we do, perhaps we'll make sure that they don't get any funny ideas about shoving us out of the driver's seat....

Arthur C. Clarke's latest book, *Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipeds!*, a compilation of some of his best nonfiction pieces from the full span of his career, provides very interesting comparisons and contrasts in this context. From his earliest published writings — reviews of books on rocketry — through his most recent newspaper editorials and satellite-broadcast addresses, Clarke displays an optimistic humanism that's so notably missing from Kurzweil's and Moravec's books. "The spirit of curiosity and wonder is the driving force behind all of Man's achievements," he wrote in 1946. "If it ever fails, the story of our race will be coming to an end."

In all of his visions of the future, Clarke never strays far from the question "why?" "It is one thing to show how spaceflight may be achieved," he wrote in 1955; "it is quite another to show why." (The same could be said of thinking machines.) Though his essays are full of practical justifications for the various positions he defends — manned space flights, universal education, a planetary defense system against asteroids and comets — his ultimate reasons lie deeper, beyond material considerations. In 1962's "Rocket to the Renaissance," he wrote: "The creation of wealth is not to be despised, but in the long run the only human activities really worthwhile are the search for knowledge and the creation of beauty." And he is never shy about hoping for significant improvements in human life: "When a world economic system is functioning smoothly, when all standards of living are approaching the same level, when no national armaments are left..."

The utopian dreams of a naïve young man? Perhaps, though Clarke was twenty-nine at the time, and expresses similar aspirations in his writings up to the present day. But

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such idealism, such boundless hope, is one of the characteristics that brought me to sf in the first place. The resignation evident in Kurzweil and Moravec, their unexamined assumption that the ways and means of American capitalism will forever dominate our culture (even relations between Moravec's superintelligent machines are described in terms of today's corporate politics), strike me as a sad indication of the diminishment of our vision.

On the other hand, there are some instances of striking parallels between Clarke's essays and the views of Kurzweil and Moravec. In "The Obsolescence of Man" (1962), Clarke pursued a nearly identical argument: "To put it bluntly and brutally, the machine is going to take over." Given Clarke's unblinking rationalism, it's not tremendously surprising that he considered this possibility — would you expect less from the creator of HAL 9000? What is strange is Clarke's attitude toward this fate: He's as accepting of it as Moravec. "No individual exists forever," he writes, "why should we expect our species to be immortal?"

This position seems to contra-

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dict Clarke's unflagging belief in the capabilities of human beings. An essay from some years later — "The Mind of the Machine" (1972) — reveals a slightly different take on the subject. Here Clarke, like Moravec, foresees a world of humans freed from the toil of industrial society by the services of intelligent machines, and instead of extinction, Clarke posits a distant coexistence, with humanity dwelling on an edenic Earth while "the culture of the ultraintelligent machines" goes on its own "unfathomable way." This is something of a compromise; machines will outdo humans, but they won't necessarily extinguish us or crush our spirits.

Clarke revisits the issue again in the more recent essay "The Coming Cyberclasm" (1995). Here, in light of the "zombification" he sees in the slaves of the Sony Walkman, Clarke deplores the possibility of a human race grown inert and dependent upon its machines for support. In the end, he says, "The machines may unplug us," and that "would serve us right."

The essays in *Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipeds!* offer a reminder that one of the best purposes of futuristic speculation, whether fictional or not, is the outlining of *possible* futures, that we may choose among them. Science and technology, Clarke tells us, "decide the kind of futures that are possible: human wisdom must decide which are desirable." This is the dimension that's missing from Kurzweil's and Moravec's books. It's a dimension that sf naturally brings to bear, and one can only hope that our visionary humanists — Robinson, Cadigan, Bear, et al. — will map out this territory while it's still fictional, and help us claim a more desirable future while we still can.

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Ursula Le Guin is the beloved author of such classics as The Left Hand of Darkness, The Dispossessed, *and* A Wizard of Earthsea. *Her first* F&SF *story was "The Barrow" in our October 1976 issue and her most recent was "Solitude" in December of 1994. During the past few years, she has mostly been writing science fiction, including an Ekumen novel called* The Telling *due out next year. However, in recent times she has decided that calling* Tehanu *"the Last Book of Earthsea" was premature and there's more to say about that particular fantasy world. The first new Earthsea story appeared in the anthology* Legends *that Robert Silverberg edited last year, and now we bring you this lovely tale.*

Darkrose and Diamond

By Ursula K. Le Guin

A Boat-Song from West Havnor

Where my love is going
There will I go.
Where his boat is rowing
I will row.

We will laugh together,
Together we will cry.
If he lives I will live,
If he dies I die.

Where my love is going
There will I go.
Where his boat is rowing
I will row.

In the west of Havnor, among hills forested with oak and chestnut, is the town of Glade. A while ago, the rich man of that town was a

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merchant called Golden. Golden owned the mill that cut the oak boards for the ships they built in Havnor South Port and Havnor Great Port; he owned the biggest chestnut groves; he owned the carts and hired the carters that carried the timber and the chestnuts over the hills to be sold. He did very well from trees, and when his son was born, the mother said, "We could call him Chestnut, or Oak, maybe?" But the father said, "Diamond," diamond being in his estimation the one thing more precious than gold.

So little Diamond grew up in the finest house in Glade, a fat, bright-eyed baby, a ruddy, cheerful boy. He had a sweet singing voice, a true ear, and a love of music, so that his mother, Tuly, called him Songsparrow and Skylark, among other loving names, for she never really did like "Diamond." He trilled and carolled about the house; he knew any tune as soon as he heard it, and invented tunes when he heard none. His mother had the wisewoman Tangle teach him *The Creation of Éa* and *The Deed of the Young King*, and at Sunreturn when he was eleven years old he sang the Winter Carol for the Lord of the Western Land, who was visiting his domain in the hills above Glade. The Lord and his Lady praised the boy's singing and gave him a tiny gold box with a diamond set in the lid, which seemed a kind and pretty gift to Diamond and his mother. But Golden was a bit impatient with the singing and the trinkets. "There are more important things for you to do, son," he said. "And greater prizes to be earned."

Diamond thought his father meant the business — the loggers, the sawyers, the sawmill, the chestnut groves, the pickers, the carters, the carts — all that work and talk and planning, complicated, adult matters. He never felt that it had much to do with him, so how was he to have as much to do with it as his father expected? Maybe he'd find out when he grew up.

But in fact Golden wasn't thinking only about the business. He had observed something about his son that had made him not exactly set his eyes higher than the business, but glance above it from time to time, and then shut his eyes.

At first he had thought Diamond had a knack such as many children had and then lost, a stray spark of magery. When he was a little boy, Golden himself had been able to make his own shadow shine and sparkle.

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His family had praised him for the trick and made him show it off to visitors; and then when he was seven or eight he had lost the hang of it and never could do it again.

When he saw Diamond come down the stairs without touching the stairs, he thought his eyes had deceived him; but a few days later, he saw the child float up the stairs, just a finger gliding along the oaken banister-rail. "Can you do that coming down?" Golden asked, and Diamond said, "Oh, yes, like this," and sailed back down smooth as a cloud on the south wind.

"How did you learn to do that?"

"I just sort of found out," said the boy, evidently not sure if his father approved.

Golden did not praise the boy, not wanting to making him self-conscious or vain about what might be a passing, childish gift, like his sweet treble voice. There was too much fuss already made over that.

But a year or so later he saw Diamond out in the back garden with his playmate Rose. The children were squatting on their haunches, heads close together, laughing. Something intense or uncanny about them made him pause at the window on the stairs landing and watch them. A thing between them was leaping up and down, a frog? a toad? a big cricket? He went out into the garden and came up near them, moving so quietly, though he was a big man, that they in their absorption did not hear him. The thing that was hopping up and down on the grass between their bare toes was a rock. When Diamond raised his hand the rock jumped up in the air, and when he shook his hand a little the rock hovered in the air, and when he flipped his fingers downward it fell to earth.

"Now you," Diamond said to Rose, and she started to do what he had done, but the rock only twitched a little. "Oh," she whispered, "there's your dad."

"That's very clever," Golden said.

"Di thought it up," Rose said.

Golden did not like the child. She was both outspoken and defensive, both rash and timid. She was a girl, and a year younger than Diamond, and a witch's daughter. He wished his son would play with boys his own age, his own sort, from the respectable families of Glade. Tuly insisted on calling the witch "the wisewoman," but a witch was a witch and her

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daughter was no fit companion for Diamond. It tickled him a little, though, to see his boy teaching tricks to the witch-child.

"What else can you do, Diamond?" he asked.

"Play the flute," Diamond said promptly, and took out of his pocket the little fife his mother had given him for his twelfth birthday. He put it to his lips, his fingers danced, and he played a sweet, familiar tune from the western coast, "Where My Love Is Going."

"Very nice," said the father. "But anybody can play the fife, you know."

Diamond glanced at Rose. The girl turned her head away, looking down.

"I learned it really quickly," Diamond said.

Golden grunted, unimpressed.

"It can do it by itself," Diamond said, and held out the fife away from his lips. His fingers danced on the stops, and the fife played a short jig. It hit several false notes and squealed on the last high note. "I haven't got it right yet," Diamond said, vexed and embarrassed.

"Pretty good, pretty good," his father said. "Keep practicing." And he went on. He was not sure what he ought to have said. He did not want to encourage the boy to spend any more time on music, or with this girl; he spent too much already, and neither of them would help him get anywhere in life. But this gift, this undeniable gift — the rock hovering, the unblown fife — Well, it would be wrong to make too much of it, but probably it should not be discouraged.

In Golden's understanding, money was power, but not the only power. There were two others, one equal, one greater. There was birth. When the Lord of the Western Land came to his domain near Glade, Golden was glad to show him fealty. The Lord was born to govern and to keep the peace, as Golden was born to deal with commerce and wealth, each in his place; and each, noble or common, if he served well and honestly, deserved honor and respect. But there were also lesser lords whom Golden could buy and sell, lend to or let beg, men born noble who deserved neither fealty nor honor. Power of birth and power of money were contingent, and must be earned lest they be lost.

But beyond the rich and the lordly were those called the Men of Power: the wizards. Their power, though little exercised, was absolute.

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In their hands lay the fate of the long-kingless kingdom of the Archipelago.

If Diamond had been born to that kind of power, if that was his gift, then all Golden's dreams and plans of training him in the business, and having him help in expanding the carting route to a regular trade with South Port, and buying up the chestnut forests above Reche — all such plans dwindled into trifles. Might Diamond go (as his mother's uncle had gone) to the School of Wizards on Roke Island? Might he (as that uncle had done) gain glory for his family and dominion over lord and commoner, becoming a Mage in the Court of the Lords Regent in the Great Port of Havnor? Golden all but floated up the stairs himself, borne on such visions.

But he said nothing to the boy and nothing to the boy's mother. He was a consciously close-mouthed man, distrustful of visions until they could be made acts; and she, though a dutiful, loving wife and mother and housekeeper, already made too much of Diamond's talents and accomplishments. Also, like all women, she was inclined to babble and gossip, and indiscriminate in her friendships. The girl Rose hung about with Diamond because Tuly encouraged Rose's mother the witch to visit, consulting her every time Diamond had a hangnail, and telling her more than she or anyone ought to know about Golden's household. His business was none of the witch's business. On the other hand, Tangle might be able to tell him if his son in fact showed promise, had a talent for magery...but he flinched away from the thought of asking her, asking a witch's opinion on anything, least of all a judgment on his son.

He resolved to wait and watch. Being a patient man with a strong will, he did so for four years, till Diamond was sixteen. A big, well-grown youth, good at games and lessons, he was still ruddy-faced and bright-eyed and cheerful. He had taken it hard when his voice changed, the sweet treble going all untuned and hoarse. Golden had hoped that that was the end of his singing, but the boy went on wandering about with itinerant musicians, ballad-singers and such, learning all their trash. That was no life for a merchant's son who was to inherit and manage his father's properties and mills and business, and Golden told him so. "Singing time is over, son," he said. "You must think about being a man."

Diamond had been given his truename at the springs of the Amia in

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the hills above Glade. The wizard Hemlock, who had known his great-uncle the Mage, came up from South Port to name him. And Hemlock was invited to his nameday party the year after, a big party, beer and food for all, and new clothes, a shirt or skirt or shift for every child, which was an old custom in the West of Havnor, and dancing on the village green in the warm autumn evening. Diamond had many friends, all the boys his age in town and all the girls too. The young people danced, and some of them had a bit too much beer, but nobody misbehaved very badly, and it was a merry and memorable night. The next morning Golden told his son again that he must think about being a man.

"I have thought some about it," said the boy, in his husky voice.

"And?"

"Well, I," said Diamond, and stuck.

"I'd always counted on your going into the family business," Golden said. His tone was neutral, and Diamond said nothing. "Have you had any ideas of what you want to do?"

"Sometimes."

"Did you talk at all to Master Hemlock?"

Diamond hesitated and said, "No." He looked a question at his father.

"I talked to him last night," Golden said. "He said to me that there are certain natural gifts which it's not only difficult but actually wrong, harmful, to suppress."

The light had come back into Diamond's dark eyes.

"The Master said that such gifts or capacities, untrained, are not only wasted, but may be dangerous. The art must be learned, and practiced, he said."

Diamond's face shone.

"But, he said, it must be learned and practiced for its own sake."

Diamond nodded eagerly.

"If it's a real gift, an unusual capacity, that's even more true. A witch with her love potions can't do much harm, but even a village sorcerer, he said, must take care, for if the art is used for base ends, it becomes weak and noxious....Of course, even a sorcerer gets paid. And wizards, as you know, live with lords, and have what they wish."

Diamond was listening intently, frowning a little.

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"So, to be blunt about it, if you have this gift, Diamond, it's of no use, directly, to our business. It has to be cultivated on its own terms, and kept under control — learned and mastered. Only then, he said, can your teachers begin to tell you what to do with it, what good it will do you. Or others," he added conscientiously.

There was a long pause.

"I told him," Golden said, "that I had seen you, with a turn of your hand and a single word, change a wooden carving of a bird into a bird that flew up and sang. I've seen you make a light glow in thin air. You didn't know I was watching. I've watched and said nothing for a long time. I didn't want to make too much of mere childish play. But I believe you have a gift, perhaps a great gift. When I told Master Hemlock what I'd seen you do, he agreed with me. He said that you may go study with him in South Port for a year, or perhaps longer."

"Study with Master Hemlock?" said Diamond, his voice up half an octave.

"If you wish."

"I, I, I never thought about it. Can I think about it? For a while — a day?"

"Of course," Golden said, pleased with his son's caution. He had thought Diamond might leap at the offer, which would have been natural, perhaps, but painful to the father, the owl who had — perhaps — hatched out an eagle.

For Golden looked on the Art Magic with genuine humility as something quite beyond him — not a mere toy, such as music or tale-telling, but a practical business, which his business could never quite equal. And he was, though he wouldn't have put it that way, afraid of wizards. A bit contemptuous of sorcerers, with their sleights and illusions and gibble-gabble, but afraid of wizards.

"Does Mother know?" Diamond asked.

"She will when the time comes. But she has no part to play in your decision, Diamond. Women know nothing of these matters and have nothing to do with them. You must make your choice alone, as a man. Do you understand that?" Golden was earnest, seeing his chance to begin to wean the lad from his mother. She as a woman would cling, but he as a man must learn to let go. And Diamond nodded sturdily enough to satisfy his father, though he had a thoughtful look.

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"Master Hemlock said I, said he thought I had, I might have a, a gift, a talent for — ?"

Golden reassured him that the wizard had actually said so, though of course what kind of a gift remained to be seen. The boy's modesty was a great relief to him. He had half-consciously dreaded that Diamond would triumph over him, asserting his power right away — that mysterious, dangerous, incalculable power against which Golden's wealth and mastery and dignity shrank to impotence.

"Thank you, Father," the boy said. Golden embraced him and left, well pleased with him.

THEIR MEETING PLACE was in the sallows, the willow thickets down by the Amia as it ran below the smithy. As soon as Rose got there, Diamond said, "He wants me to go study with Master Hemlock! What am I going to do?"

"Study with the wizard?"

"He thinks I have this huge great talent. For magic."

"Who does?"

"Father does. He saw some of the stuff we were practicing. But he says Hemlock says I should come study with him because it might be dangerous not to. Oh," and Diamond beat his head with his hands.

"But you do have a talent."

He groaned and scoured his scalp with his knuckles. He was sitting on the dirt in their old play-place, a kind of bower deep in the willows, where they could hear the stream running over the stones nearby and the clang-clang of the smithy further off. The girl sat down facing him.

"Look at all the stuff you can do," she said. "You couldn't do any of it if you didn't have a gift."

"A little gift," Diamond said indistinctly. "Enough for tricks."

"How do you know that?"

Rose was very dark-skinned, with a cloud of crinkled hair, a thin mouth, an intent, serious face. Her feet and legs and hands were bare and dirty, her skirt and jacket disreputable. Her dirty toes and fingers were delicate and elegant, and a necklace of amethysts gleamed under the torn, buttonless jacket. Her mother, Tangle, made a good living by curing and

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healing, bone-knitting and birth-easing, and selling spells of finding, love-potions, and sleeping-drafts. She could afford to dress herself and her daughter in new clothes, buy shoes, and keep clean, but it didn't occur to her to do so. Nor was housekeeping one of her interests. She and Rose lived mostly on boiled chicken and fried eggs, as she was often paid in poultry. The yard of their two-room house was a wilderness of cats and hens. She liked cats, toads, and jewels. The amethyst necklace had been payment for the safe delivery of a son to Golden's head forester. Tangle herself wore armfuls of bracelets and bangles that flashed and crashed when she flicked out an impatient spell. At times she wore a kitten on her shoulder. She was not an attentive mother. Rose had demanded, at seven years old, "Why did you have me if you didn't want me?"

"How can you deliver babies properly if you haven't had one?" said her mother.

"So I was practice," Rose snarled.

"Everything is practice," Tangle said. She was never ill-natured. She seldom thought to do anything much for her daughter, but never hurt her, never scolded her, and gave her whatever she asked for, dinner, a toad of her own, the amethyst necklace, lessons in witchcraft. She would have provided new clothes if Rose had asked for them, but she never did. Rose had looked after herself from an early age; and this was one of the reasons Diamond loved her. With her, he knew what freedom was. Without her, he could attain it only when he was hearing and singing and playing music.

"I do have a gift," he said now, rubbing his temples and pulling his hair.

"Stop destroying your head," Rose told him.

"I know Tarry thinks I do."

"Of course you do! What does it matter what Tarry thinks? You already play the harp about nine times better than he ever did."

This was another of the reasons Diamond loved her.

"Are there any wizard musicians?" he asked, looking up.

She pondered. "I don't know."

"I don't either. Morred and Elfarran sang to each other, and he was a mage. I think there's a Master Chanter on Roke, that teaches the lays and the histories. But I never heard of a wizard being a musician."

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"I don't see why one couldn't be." She never saw why something could not be. Another reason he loved her.

"It always seemed to me they're sort of alike," he said, "magic and music. Spells and tunes. For one thing, you have to get them just exactly right."

"Practice," Rose said, rather sourly. "I know." She flicked a pebble at Diamond. It turned into a butterfly in midair. He flicked a butterfly back at her, and the two flitted and flickered a moment before they fell back to earth as pebbles. Diamond and Rose had worked out several such variations on the old stone-hopping trick.

"You ought to go, Di," she said. "Just to find out."

"I know."

"What if you got to be a wizard! Oh! Think of the stuff you could teach me! Shapechanging — We could be anything. Horses! Bears!"

"Moles," Diamond said. "Honestly, I feel like hiding underground. I always thought Father was going to make me learn all his kind of stuff, after I got my name. But all this year he's kept sort of holding off. I guess he had this in mind all along. But what if I go down there and I'm not any better at being a wizard than I am at bookkeeping? Why can't I do what I know I *can* do?"

"Well, why can't you do it all? The magic and the music, anyhow? You can always hire a bookkeeper."

When she laughed, her thin face got bright, her thin mouth got wide, and her eyes disappeared.

"Oh, Darkrose," Diamond said, "I love you."

"Of course you do. You'd better. I'll witch you if you don't."

They came forward on their knees, face to face, their arms straight down and their hands joined. They kissed each other all over their faces. To Rose's lips Diamond's face was smooth and full as a plum, with just a hint of prickliness above the lip and jawline, where he had taken to shaving recently. To Diamond's lips Rose's face was soft as silk, with just a hint of grittiness on one cheek, which she had rubbed with a dirty hand. They moved a little closer so that their breasts and bellies touched, though their hands stayed down by their sides. They went on kissing.

"Darkrose," he breathed in her ear, his secret name for her.

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She said nothing, but breathed very warm in his ear, and he moaned. His hands clenched hers. He drew back a little. She drew back.

They sat back on their ankles.

"Oh Di," she said, "it will be awful when you go."

"I won't go," he said. "Anywhere. Ever."

BUT OF COURSE he went down to Havnor South Port, in one of his father's carts driven by one of his father's carters, along with Master Hemlock. As a rule, people do what wizards advise them to do. And it is no small honor to be invited by a wizard to be his student or apprentice. Hemlock, who had won his staff on Roke, was used to having boys come to him begging to be tested and, if they had the gift for it, taught. He was a little curious about this boy whose cheerful good manners hid some reluctance or self-doubt. It was the father's idea, not the boy's, that he was gifted. That was unusual, though perhaps not so unusual among the wealthy as among common folk. At any rate he came with a very good prenticing fee paid beforehand in gold and ivory. If he had the makings of a wizard Hemlock would train him, and if he had, as Hemlock suspected, a mere childish flair, then he'd be sent home with what remained of his fee. Hemlock was an honest, upright, humorless, scholarly wizard with little interest in feelings or ideas. His gift was for names. "The art begins and ends in naming," he said, which indeed is true, although there may be a good deal between the beginning and the end.

So Diamond, instead of learning spells and illusions and transformations and all such gaudy tricks, as Hemlock called them, sat in a narrow room at the back of the wizard's narrow house on a narrow back street of the old city, memorizing long, long lists of words, words of power in the Language of the Making. Plants and parts of plants and animals and parts of animals and islands and parts of islands, parts of ships, parts of the human body. The words never made sense, never made sentences, only lists. Long, long lists.

His mind wandered. "Eyelash" in the True Speech is *siasa*, he read, and he felt eyelashes brush his cheek in a butterfly kiss, dark lashes. He looked up startled and did not know what had touched him. Later when he tried to repeat the word, he stood dumb.

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"Memory, memory," Hemlock said. "Talent's no good without memory!" He was not harsh, but he was unyielding. Diamond had no idea what opinion Hemlock had of him, and guessed it to be pretty low. The wizard sometimes had him come with him to his work, mostly laying spells of safety on ships and houses, purifying wells, and sitting on the councils of the city, seldom speaking but always listening. Another wizard, not Roke-trained but with the healer's gift, looked after the sick and dying of South Port. Hemlock was glad to let him do so. His own pleasure was in studying and, as far as Diamond could see, doing no magic at all. "Keep the Equilibrium, it's all in that," Hemlock said, and, "Knowledge, order, and control." Those words he said so often that they made a tune in Diamond's head and sang themselves over and over: knowledge, or-der, and contro———l....

When Diamond put the lists of names to tunes he made up, he learned them much faster; but then the tune would come as part of the name, and he would sing out so clearly — for his voice had re-established itself as a strong, dark tenor — that Hemlock winced. Hemlock's was a very silent house.

Mostly the pupil was supposed to be with the Master, or studying the lists of names in the room where the lorebooks and wordbooks were, or asleep. Hemlock was a stickler for early abed and early afoot. But now and then Diamond had an hour or two free. He always went down to the docks and sat on a pierside or a waterstair and thought about Darkrose. As soon as he was out of the house and away from Master Hemlock, he began to think about Darkrose, and went on thinking about her and very little else. It surprised him a little. He thought he ought to be homesick, to think about his mother. He did think about his mother quite often, and often was homesick, lying on his cot in his bare and narrow little room after a scanty supper of cold pea-porridge — for this wizard, at least, did not live in such luxury as Golden had imagined. Diamond never thought about Darkrose, nights. He thought of his mother, or of sunny rooms and hot food, or a tune would come into his head and he would practice it mentally on the harp in his mind, and so drift off to sleep. Darkrose would come to his mind only when he was down at the docks, staring out at the water of the harbor, the piers, the fishing boats, only when he was outdoors and away from Hemlock and his house.

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So he cherished his free hours as if they were actual meetings with her. He had always loved her, but had not understood that he loved her beyond anyone and anything. When he was with her, even when he was down on the docks thinking of her, he was alive. He never felt entirely alive in Master Hemlock's house and presence. He felt a little dead. Not dead, but a little dead.

A few times, sitting on the waterstairs, the dirty harbor water sloshing at the next step down, the yells of gulls and dockworkers wreathing the air with a thin, ungainly music, he shut his eyes and saw his love so clear, so close, that he reached out his hand to touch her. If he reached out his hand in his mind only, as when he played the mental harp, then indeed he touched her. He felt her hand in his, and her cheek, warm-cool, silken-gritty, lay against his mouth. In his mind he spoke to her, and in his mind she answered, her voice, her husky voice saying his name, "Diamond...."

But as he went back up the streets of South Port he lost her. He swore to keep her with him, to think of her, to think of her that night, but she faded away. By the time he opened the door of Master Hemlock's house he was reciting lists of names, or wondering what would be for dinner, for he was hungry most of the time. Not till he could take an hour and run back down to the docks could he think of her.

So he came to feel that those hours were true meetings with her, and he lived for them, without knowing what he lived for until his feet were on the cobbles, and his eyes on the harbor and the far line of the sea. Then he remembered what was worth remembering.

The winter passed by, and the cold early spring, and with the warm late spring came a letter from his mother, brought by a carter. Diamond read it and took it to Master Hemlock, saying, "My mother wonders if I might spend a month at home this summer."

"Probably not," the wizard said, and then, appearing to notice Diamond, put down his pen and said, "Young man, I must ask you if you wish to continue studying with me."

Diamond had no idea what to say. The idea of its being up to him had not occurred to him. "Do you think I ought to?" he asked at last.

"Probably not," the wizard said.

Diamond expected to feel relieved, released, but found he felt rejected, ashamed.

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"I'm sorry," he said, with enough dignity that Hemlock glanced up at him.

"You could go to Roke," the wizard said.

"To Roke?"

The boy's drop-jawed stare irritated Hemlock, though he knew it shouldn't. Wizards are used to overweening confidence in the young of their kind. They expect modesty to come later, if at all. "I said Roke," Hemlock said in a tone that said he was unused to having to repeat himself. And then, because this boy, this soft-headed, spoiled, moony boy had endeared himself to Hemlock by his uncomplaining patience, he took pity on him and said, "You should either go to Roke or find a wizard to teach you what you need. Of course you need what I can teach you. You need the names. The art begins and ends in naming. But that's not your gift. You have a poor memory for words. You must train it diligently. However, it's clear that you do have capacities, and that they need cultivation and discipline, which another man can give you better than I can." So does modesty breed modesty, sometimes, even in unlikely places. "If you were to go to Roke, I'd send a letter with you drawing you to the particular attention of the Master Summoner."

"Ah," said Diamond, floored. The Summoner's art is perhaps the most arcane and dangerous of all the arts of magic.

"Perhaps I am wrong," said Hemlock in his dry, flat voice. "Your gift may be for Pattern. Or perhaps it's an ordinary gift for shaping and transformation. I'm not certain."

"But you are — I do actually — "

"Oh yes. You are uncommonly slow, young man, to recognize your own capacities." It was spoken harshly, and Diamond stiffened up a bit.

"I thought my gift was for music," he said.

Hemlock dismissed that with a flick of his hand. "I am talking of the True Art," he said. "Now I will be frank with you. I advise you to write your parents — I shall write them too — informing them of your decision to go to the School on Roke, if that is what you decide; or to the Great Port, if the Mage Restive will take you on, as I think he will, with my recommendation. But I advise against visiting home. The entanglement of family, friends, and so on is precisely what you need to be free of. Now, and henceforth."

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"Do wizards have no family?"

Hemlock was glad to see a bit of fire in the boy. "They are one another's family," he said.

"And no friends?"

"They may be friends. Did I say it was an easy life?" A pause. Hemlock looked directly at Diamond. "There was a girl," he said.

Diamond met his gaze for a moment, looked down, and said nothing.

"Your father told me. A witch's daughter, a childhood playmate. He believed that you had taught her spells."

"She taught me."

Hemlock nodded. "That is quite understandable, among children. And quite impossible now. Do you understand that?"

"No," Diamond said.

"Sit down," said Hemlock. After a moment Diamond took the stiff, high-backed chair facing him.

"I can protect you here, and have done so. On Roke, of course, you'll be perfectly safe. The very walls, there...But if you go home, you must be willing to protect yourself. It's a difficult thing for a young man, very difficult — a test of a will that has not yet been steeled, a mind that has not yet seen its true goal. I very strongly advise that you not take that risk. Write your parents, and go to the Great Port, or to Roke. Half your year's fee, which I'll return to you, will see to your first expenses."

Diamond sat upright and still. He had been getting some of his father's height and girth lately, and looked very much a man, though a very young one.

"What did you mean, Master Hemlock, in saying that you had protected me here?"

"Simply as I protect myself," the wizard said; and after a moment, testily, "The bargain, boy. The power we give for our power. The lesser state of being we forego. Surely you know that every true man of power is celibate."

There was a pause, and Diamond said, "So you saw to it...that I..."

"Of course. It was my responsibility as your teacher."

Diamond nodded. He said, "Thank you." Presently he stood up. "Excuse me, Master," he said. "I have to think."

"Where are you going?"

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"Down to the waterfront."

"Better stay here."

"I can't think, here."

Hemlock might have known then what he was up against; but having told the boy he would not be his master any longer, he could not in conscience command him. "You have a true gift, Essiri," he said, using the name he had given the boy in the springs of the Amia, a word that in the Old Speech means Willow. "I don't entirely understand it. I think you don't understand it at all. Take care! To misuse a gift, or to refuse to use it, may cause great loss, great harm."

Diamond nodded, suffering, contrite, unrebellious, unmovable.

"Go on," the wizard said, and he went.

Later he knew he should never have let the boy leave the house. He had underestimated Diamond's willpower, or the strength of the spell the girl had laid on him. Their conversation was in the morning; Hemlock went back to the ancient cantrip he was annotating; it was not till supper time that he thought about his pupil, and not until he had eaten supper alone that he admitted that Diamond had run away.

Hemlock was loth to practice any of the lesser arts of magic. He did not put out a finding spell, as any sorcerer might have done. Nor did he call to Diamond in any way. He was angry; perhaps he was hurt. He had thought well of the boy, and offered to write the Summoner about him, and then at the first test of character Diamond had broken. "Glass," the wizard muttered. At least this weakness proved he was not dangerous. Some talents were best not left to run wild, but there was no harm in this fellow, no malice. No ambition. "No spine," said Hemlock to the silence of the house. "Let him crawl home to his mother."

Still it rankled him that Diamond had let him down flat, without a word of thanks or apology. So much for good manners, he thought.

As she blew out the lamp and got into bed, the witch's daughter heard an owl calling, the little, liquid hu-hu-hu-hu that made people call them laughing owls. She heard it with a mournful heart. That had been their signal, summer nights, when they sneaked out to meet in the willow grove, down on the banks of the Amia, when everybody else was sleeping. She would not think of him at night. Back in the winter she had sent to

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him night after night. She had learned her mother's spell of sending, and knew that it was a true spell. She had sent him her touch, her voice saying his name, again and again. She had met a wall of air and silence. She touched nothing. He would not hear.

Once or twice, all of a sudden, in the daytime, there had been a moment when she had known him close in mind and could touch him if she reached out. But at night she knew only his blank absence, his refusal of her. She had stopped trying to reach him, months ago, but her heart was still very sore.

"Hu-hu-hu," said the owl, under her window, and then it said, "Darkrose!" Startled from her misery, she leaped out of bed and opened the shutters.

"Come on out," whispered Diamond, a shadow in the starlight.

"Mother's not home. Come in!" She met him at the door.

They held each other tight, hard, silent for a long time. To Diamond it was as if he held his future, his own life, his whole life, in his arms.

At last she moved, and kissed his cheek, and whispered, "I missed you, I missed you, I missed you. How long can you stay?"

"As long as I like."

She kept his hand and led him in. He was always a little reluctant to enter the witch's house, a pungent, disorderly place thick with the mysteries of women and witchcraft, very different from his own clean comfortable home, even more different from the cold austerity of the wizard's house. He shivered like a horse as he stood there, too tall for the herb-festooned rafters. He was very highly strung, and worn out, having walked forty miles in sixteen hours without food.

"Where's your mother?" he asked in a whisper.

"Sitting with old Ferny. She died this afternoon, Mother will be there all night. But how did you get here?"

"Walked."

"The wizard let you visit home?"

"I ran away."

"Ran away! Why?"

"To keep you."

He looked at her, that vivid, fierce, dark face in its rough cloud of hair. She wore only her shift, and he saw the infinitely delicate, tender

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rise of her breasts. He drew her to him again, but though she hugged him she drew away again, frowning.

"Keep me?" she repeated. "You didn't seem to worry about losing me all winter. What made you come back now?"

"He wanted me to go to Roke."

"To Roke?" She stared. "To Roke, Di? Then you really do have the gift — you could be a sorcerer?"

To find her on Hemlock's side was a blow.

"Sorcerers are nothing to him. He means I could be a wizard. Do magery. Not just witchcraft."

"Oh I see," Rose said after a moment. "But I don't see why you ran away."

They had let go of each other's hands.

"Don't you understand?" he said, exasperated with her for not understanding, because he had not understood. "A wizard can't have anything to do with women. With witches. With all that."

"Oh, I know. It's beneath them."

"It's not just beneath them — "

"Oh, but it is. I'll bet you had to unlearn every spell I taught you. Didn't you?"

"It isn't the same kind of thing."

"No. It isn't the High Art. It isn't the True Speech. A wizard mustn't soil his lips with common words. 'Weak as women's magic, wicked as women's magic,' you think I don't know what they say? So, why did you come back here?"

"To see you!"

"What for?"

"What do you think?"

"You never sent to me, you never let me send to you, all the time you were gone. I was just supposed to wait until you got tired of playing wizard. Well, I got tired of waiting." Her voice was nearly inaudible, a rough whisper.

"Somebody's been coming around," he said, incredulous that she could turn against him. "Who's been after you?"

"None of your business if there is! You go off, you turn your back on me. Wizards can't have anything to do with what I do, what my mother does.

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Well, I don't want anything to do with what you do, either, ever. So go!"

Starving hungry, frustrated, misunderstood, Diamond reached out to hold her again, to make her body understand his body, repeating that first, deep embrace that had held all the years of their lives in it. He found himself standing two feet back, his hands stinging and his ears ringing and his eyes dazzled. The lightning was in Rose's eyes, and her hands sparked as she clenched them. "Never do that again," she whispered.

"Never fear," Diamond said, turned on his heel, and strode out. A string of dried sage caught on his head and trailed after him.

HE SPENT THE NIGHT in their old place in the sallows. Maybe he hoped she would come, but she did not come, and he soon slept in sheer weariness. He woke in the first, cold light. He sat up and thought. He looked at life in that cold light. It was a different matter from what he had believed it. He went down to the stream in which he had been named. He drank, washed his hands and face, made himself look as decent as he could, and went up through the town to the fine house at the high end, his father's house.

After the first outcries and embraces, the servants and his mother sat him right down to breakfast. So it was with warm food in his belly and a certain chill courage in his heart that he faced his father, who had been out before breakfast seeing off a string of timber-carts to the Great Port.

"Well, son!" They touched cheeks. "So Master Hemlock gave you a vacation?"

"No, sir. I left."

Golden stared, then filled his plate and sat down. "Left," he said.

"Yes, sir. I decided that I don't want to be a wizard."

"Hmf," said Golden, chewing. "Left of your own accord? Entirely? With the Master's permission?"

"Of my own accord entirely, without his permission."

Golden chewed very slowly, his eyes on the table. Diamond had seen his father look like this when a forester reported an infestation in the chestnut groves, and when he found a mule-dealer had cheated him.

"He wanted me to go to the College on Roke to study with the Master Summoner. He was going to send me there. I decided not to go."

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After a while Golden asked, still looking at the table, "Why?"

"It isn't the life I want."

Another pause. Golden glanced over at his wife, who stood by the window listening in silence. Then he looked at his son. Slowly the mixture of anger, disappointment, confusion, and respect on his face gave way to something simpler, a look of complicity, very nearly a wink. "I see," he said. "And what did you decide you want?"

A pause. "This," Diamond said. His voice was level. He looked neither at his father nor his mother.

"Hah!" said Golden. "Well! I will say I'm glad of it, son." He ate a small porkpie in one mouthful. "Being a wizard, going to Roke, all that, it never seemed real, not exactly. And with you off there, I didn't know what all this was for, to tell you the truth. All my business. If you're here, it adds up, you see. It adds up. Well! But listen here, did you just run off from the wizard? Did he know you were going?"

"No. I'll write him," Diamond said, in his new, level voice.

"He won't be angry? They say wizards have short tempers. Full of pride."

"He's angry," Diamond said, "but he won't do anything."

So it proved. Indeed, to Golden's amazement, Master Hemlock sent back a scrupulous two-fifths of the prenticing fee. With the packet, which was delivered by one of Golden's carters who had taken a load of spars down to South Port, was a note for Diamond. It said, "True art requires a single heart." The direction on the outside was the Hardic rune for willow. The note was signed with Hemlock's rune, which had two meanings: the hemlock tree, and suffering.

Diamond sat in his own sunny room upstairs, on his comfortable bed, hearing his mother singing as she went about the house. He held the wizard's letter and reread the message and the two runes many times. The cold and sluggish mind that had been born in him that morning down in the sallows accepted the lesson. No magic. Never again. He had never given his heart to it. It had been a game to him, a game to play with Darkrose. Even the names of the True Speech that he had learned in the wizard's house, though he knew the beauty and the power that lay in them, he could let go, let slip, forget. That was not his language.

He could speak his language only with her. And he had lost her, let

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her go. The double heart has no true speech. From now on he could talk only the language of duty: the getting and the spending, the outlay and the income, the profit and the loss.

And beyond that, nothing. There had been illusions, little spells, pebbles that turned to butterflies, wooden birds that flew on living wings for a minute or two. There had never been a choice, really. There was only one way for him to go.

GOLDEN WAS immensely happy and quite unconscious of it. "Old man's got his jewel back," said the carter to the forester. "Sweet as new butter, he is." Golden, unaware of being sweet, thought only how sweet life was. He had bought the Reche grove, at a very stiff price to be sure, but at least old Lowbough of Easthill hadn't got it, and now he and Diamond could develop it as it ought to be developed. In among the chestnuts there were a lot of pines, which could be felled and sold for masts and spars and small lumber, and replanted with chestnut seedlings. It would in time be a pure stand like the Big Grove, the heart of his chestnut kingdom. In time, of course. Oak and chestnut don't shoot up overnight like alder and willow. But there was time. There was time, now. The boy was barely seventeen, and he himself just forty-five. In his prime. He had been feeling old, but that was nonsense. He was in his prime. The oldest trees, past bearing, ought to come out with the pines. Some good wood for furniture could be salvaged from them.

"Well, well, well," he said to his wife, frequently, "all rosy again, eh? Got the apple of your eye back home, eh? No more moping, eh?"

And Tuly smiled and stroked his hand.

Once instead of smiling and agreeing, she said, "It's lovely to have him back, but" and Golden stopped hearing. Mothers were born to worry about their children, and women were born never to be content. There was no reason why he should listen to the litany of anxieties by which Tuly hauled herself through life. Of course she thought a merchant's life wasn't good enough for the boy. She'd have thought being King in Havnor wasn't good enough for him.

"When he gets himself a girl," Golden said, in answer to whatever it was she had been saying, "he'll be all squared away. Living with the

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wizards, you know, the way they are, it set him back a bit. Don't worry about Diamond. He'll know what he wants when he sees it!"

"I hope so," said Tuly.

"At least he's not seeing the witch's girl," said Golden. "That's done with." Later on it occurred to him that neither was his wife seeing the witch anymore. For years they'd been thick as thieves, against all his warnings, and now Tangle was never anywhere near the house. Women's friendships never lasted. He teased her about it. Finding her strewing pennyroyal and millersbane in the chests and clothes-presses against an infestation of moths, he said, "Seems like you'd have your friend the wise woman up to hex 'em away. Or aren't you friends anymore?"

"No," his wife said in her soft, level voice, "we aren't."

"And a good thing too!" Golden said roundly. "What's become of that daughter of hers, then? Went off with a juggler, I heard?"

"A musician," Tuly said. "Last summer."

"A nameday party," said Golden. "Time for a bit of play, a bit of music and dancing, boy. Nineteen years old. Celebrate it!"

"I'll be going to Easthill with Sul's mules."

"No, no, no. Sul can handle it. Stay home and have your party. You've been working hard. We'll hire a band. Who's the best in the country? Tarry and his lot?"

"Father, I don't want a party," Diamond said and stood up, shivering his muscles like a horse. He was bigger than Golden now, and when he moved abruptly it was startling. "I'll go to Easthill," he said, and left the room.

"What's that all about?" Golden said to his wife, a rhetorical question. She looked at him and said nothing, a non-rhetorical answer.

After Golden had gone out, she found her son in the counting-room going through ledgers. She looked at the pages. Long, long lists of names and numbers, debts and credits, profits and losses.

"Di," she said, and he looked up. His face was still round and a bit peachy, though the bones were heavier and the eyes were melancholy.

"I didn't mean to hurt Father's feelings," he said.

"If he wants a party, he'll have it," she said. Their voices were alike, being in the higher register but dark-toned, and held to an even

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quietness, contained, restrained. She perched on a stool beside his at the high desk.

"I can't," he said, and stopped, and went on, "I really don't want to have any dancing."

"He's matchmaking," Tuly said, dry, fond.

"I don't care about that."

"I know you don't."

"The problem is..."

"The problem is the music," his mother said at last.

He nodded.

"My son, there is no reason," she said, suddenly passionate, "there is *no* reason why you should give up everything you love!"

He took her hand and kissed it as they sat side by side.

"Things don't mix," he said. "They ought to, but they don't. I found that out. When I left the wizard, I thought I could be everything. You know — do magic, play music, be Father's son, love Rose.... It doesn't work that way. Things don't mix."

"They do, they do," Tuly said. "Everything is hooked together, tangled up!"

"Maybe things are, for women. But I...I can't be doublehearted."

"Doublehearted? You? You gave up wizardry because you knew that if you didn't, you'd betray it."

He took the word with a visible shock, but did not deny it.

"But why did you give up music?"

"I have to have a single heart. I can't play the harp while I'm bargaining with a mule-breeder. I can't sing ballads while I'm figuring what we have to pay the pickers to keep 'em from hiring out to Lowbough!" His voice shook a little now, a vibrato, and his eyes were not sad, but angry.

"So you put a spell on yourself," she said, "just as that wizard put one on you. A spell to keep you safe. To keep you with the mule-breeders, and the nut-pickers, and these." She struck the ledger full of lists of names and figures, a flicking, dismissive tap. "A spell of silence," she said.

After a long time the young man said, "What else can I do?"

"I don't know, my dear. I do want you to be safe. I do love to see your father happy and proud of you. But I can't bear to see you unhappy,

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without pride! I don't know. Maybe you're right. Maybe for a man it's only one thing ever. But I miss hearing you sing."

She was in tears. They hugged, and she stroked his thick, shining hair and apologized for being cruel, and he hugged her again and said she was the kindest mother in the world, and so she went off. But as she left she turned back a moment and said, "Let him have the party, Di. Let yourself have it."

"I will," he said, to comfort her.

Golden ordered the beer and food and fireworks, but Diamond saw to hiring the musicians.

"Of course I'll bring my band," Tarry said, "fat chance I'd miss it! You'll have every tootler in the west of the world here for one of your dad's parties."

"You can tell 'em you're the band that's getting paid."

"Oh, they'll come for the glory," said the harper, a lean, long-jawed, wall-eyed fellow of forty. "Maybe you'll have a go with us yourself, then? You had a hand for it, before you took to making money. And the voice not bad, if you'd worked on it."

"I doubt it," Diamond said.

"That girl you liked, witch's Rose, she's runing about with Labby, I hear. No doubt they'll come by."

"I'll see you then," said Diamond, looking big and handsome and indifferent, and walked off.

"Too high and mighty these days to stop and talk," said Tarry, "though I taught him all he knows of harping. But what's that to a rich man?"

Tarry's malice had left his nerves raw, and the thought of the party weighed on him till he lost his appetite. He thought hopefully for a while that he was sick and could miss the party. But the day came, and he was there. Not so evidently, so eminently, so flamboyantly there as his father, but present, smiling, dancing. All his childhood friends were there too, half of them married by now to the other half, it seemed, but there was still plenty of flirting going on, and several pretty girls were always near him. He drank a good deal of Gadge Brewer's excellent beer, and

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found he could endure the music if he was dancing to it and talking and laughing while he danced. So he danced with all the pretty girls in turn, and then again with whichever one turned up again, which all of them did.

It was Golden's grandest party yet, with a dancing floor built on the town green down the way from Golden's house, and a tent for the old folks to eat and drink and gossip in, and new clothes for the children, and jugglers and puppeteers, some of them hired and some of them coming by to pick up whatever they could in the way of coppers and free beer. Any festivity drew itinerant entertainers and musicians; it was their living, and though uninvited they were welcomed. A tale-singer with a droning voice and a droning bagpipe was singing *The Deed of the Dragonlord* to a group of people under the big oak on the hilltop. When Tarry's band of harp, fife, viol, and drum took time off for a breather and a swig, a new group hopped up onto the dance floor. "Hey, there's Labby's band!" cried the pretty girl nearest Diamond. "Come on, they're the best!"

Labby, a light-skinned, flashy-looking fellow, played the double-reed woodhorn. With him were a violist, a tabor-player, and Rose, who played fife. Their first tune was a stampy, fast and brilliant, too fast for some of the dancers. Diamond and his partner stayed in, and people cheered and clapped them when they finished the dance, sweating and panting. "Beer!" Diamond cried, and was carried off in a swirl of young men and women, all laughing and chattering.

He heard behind him the next tune start up, the viol alone, strong and sad as a tenor voice: "Where My Love Is Going."

He drank a mug of beer down in one draft, and the girls with him watched the muscles in his strong throat as he swallowed, and they laughed and chattered, and he shivered all over like a cart horse stung by flies. He said, "Oh! I can't — !" He bolted off into the dusk beyond the lanterns hanging around the brewer's booth. "Where's he going?" said one, and another, "He'll be back," and they laughed and chattered.

The tune ended. "Darkrose," he said, behind her in the dark. She turned her head and looked at him. Their heads were on a level, she sitting crosslegged up on the dance platform, he kneeling on the grass.

"Come to the sallows," he said.

She said nothing. Labby, glancing at her, set his woodhorn to his lips.

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The drummer struck a triple beat on his tabor, and they were off into a sailor's jig.

When she looked around again Diamond was gone.

Tarry came back with his band in an hour or so, ungrateful for the respite and much the worse for beer. He interrupted the tune and the dancing, telling Labby loudly to clear out.

"Ah, pick your nose, harp-picker," Labby said, and Tarry took offense, and people took sides, and while the dispute was at its brief height, Rose put her fife in her pocket and slipped away.

Away from the lanterns of the party it was dark, but she knew the way in the dark. He was there. The willows had grown, these two years. There was only a little space to sit among the green shoots and the long, falling leaves.

The music started up, distant, blurred by wind and the murmur of the river running.

"What did you want, Diamond?"

"To talk."

They were only voices and shadows to each other.

"So," she said.

"I wanted to ask you to go away with me," he said.

"When?"

"Then. When we quarreled. I said it all wrong. I thought...." A long pause. "I thought I could go on running away. With you. And play music. Make a living. Together. I meant to say that."

"You didn't say it."

"I know. I said everything wrong. I did everything wrong. I betrayed everything. The magic. And the music. And you."

"I'm all right," she said.

"Are you?"

"I'm not really good on the fife, but I'm good enough. What you didn't teach me, I can fill in with a spell, if I have to. And the band, they're all right. Labby isn't as bad as he looks. Nobody fools with me. We make a pretty good living. Winters, I go stay with Mother and help her out. So I'm all right. What about you, Di?"

"All wrong."

She started to say something, and did not say it.

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"I guess we were children," he said. "Now...."

"What's changed?"

"I made the wrong choice."

"Once?" she said. "Or twice?"

"Twice."

"Third time's the charm."

Neither spoke for a while. She could just make out the bulk of him in the leafy shadows. "You're bigger than you were," she said. "Can you still make a light, Di? I want to see you."

He shook his head.

"That was the one thing you could do that I never could. And you never could teach me."

"I didn't know what I was doing," he said. "Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't."

"And the wizard in South Port didn't teach you how to make it work?"

"He only taught me names."

"Why can't you do it now?"

"I gave it up, Darkrose. I had to either do it and nothing else, or not do it. You have to have a single heart."

"I don't see why," she said. "My mother can cure a fever and ease a childbirth and find a lost ring, maybe that's nothing compared to what the wizards and the dragonlords can do, but it's not nothing, all the same. And she didn't give up anything for it. Having me didn't stop her. She had me so that she could *learn* how to do it! Just because I learned how to play music from you, did I have to give up saying spells? I can bring a fever down now too. Why should you have to stop doing one thing so you can do the other?"

"My father," he began, and stopped, and gave a kind of laugh. "They don't go together," he said. "The money and the music."

"The father and the witchgirl," said Darkrose.

Again there was silence between them. The leaves of the willows stirred.

"Would you come back to me?" he said. "Would you go with me, live with me, marry me, Darkrose?"

"Not in your father's house, Di."

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"Anywhere. Run away."

"But you can't have me without the music."

"Or the music without you."

"I would," she said.

"Does Labby want a harper?"

She hesitated; she laughed. "If he wants a fife-player," she said.

"I haven't practiced ever since I left, Darkrose," he said. "But the music was always in my head, and you...." She reached out her hands to him. They knelt facing, the willow-leaves moving across their hair. They kissed each other, timidly at first.

IN THE YEARS after Diamond left home, Golden made more money than he had ever done before. All his deals were profitable. It was as if good fortune stuck to him and he could not shake it off. He grew immensely wealthy. He did not forgive his son. It would have made a happy ending, but he would not have it. To leave so, without a word, on his nameday night, to go off with the witchgirl, leaving all the honest work undone, to be a vagrant musician, a harper twanging and singing and grinning for pennies — there was nothing but shame and pain and anger in it for Golden. So he had his tragedy.

Tuly shared it with him for a long time, since she could see her son only by lying to her husband, which she found hard to do. She wept to think of Diamond hungry, sleeping hard. Cold nights of autumn were a misery to her. But as time went on and she heard him spoken of as Diamond the sweet singer of the West of Havnor, Diamond who had harped and sung to the great lords in the Tower of the Sword, her heart grew lighter. And once, when Golden was down at South Port, she and Tangle took a donkey cart and drove over to Easthill, where they heard Diamond sing the *Lay of the Lost Queen*, while Rose sat with them, and Little Tuly sat on Tuly's knee. And if not a happy ending, that was a true joy, which may be enough to ask for, after all.

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Those of you who expected the major novella we falsely advertised will have to contain yourselves; major though it is, this new story's not a novella. (Patience—there's one in the works.) *"Objects" is, in fact, the author's thirtieth work of fiction to appear in our pages. His first was "Paulie Charmed the Sleeping Woman" back in August, 1962, and over the years, we've had the good fortune to publish others such as "The Deathbird," "All the Lies That Are My Life," and "Jeffty Is Five."*

For you who keep track of such things, "Objects" is also the twenty-eighth story that Mr. Ellison has written seated in a store window—a wondrous feat unwittingly begotten by Georges Simenon (but that's another story) and one that may well land Mr. Ellison in Mr. Guiness's book of records. In the Dangerous Visions store in L.A. last May, Chris Carter supplied a sealed envelope in which there were these words: "The 102-year-old pregnant corpse." Thereupon, Harlan provided the rest:

Objects of Desire in the Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear

By Harlan Ellison

WE FOUND THE POOR OLD guy lying in garbage and quite a lot of his own blood in the alley next to the Midnight Mission. His shoes had been stolen — no way of knowing if he'd been wearing socks — and whatever had been in the empty, dirty paper bag he was clutching. But his fingernails were immaculate, and he had no beard stubble. Maybe sixty, maybe older. No way of telling at a cold appraisal.

There were three young women down on their knees, weeping and flailing toward the darkening sky. It was going to rain, a brick-mean rain. Bag ladies in an alley like that, yeah, no big surprise...but these weren't gap-toothed old scraggy harridans. I recognized two of them from commercials; I think the precise term is *supermodel.* Their voices outshone the traffic hissing past the alley mouth. They were obviously very broken up at the demise of this old bum.

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We strung the yellow tape; and we started assembling whatever was going to pass for witnesses; and then, without any further notice, the sky ruptured and in an instant we were all drenched. The old man's blood sluiced away in seconds, and the alley was that slick, pretty, shiny black again. So much for ambient clues.

We moved inside.

The smell of Lysol and sour mash was charming. I remember once, when I was a little kid, I shinnied up an old maple tree and found a bird nest that had recently been occupied by, I don't know, maybe robins, maybe crows, or something, and it had a smell that was both nasty and disturbing. The inside of the room they let us use for our interrogation smelled not much the same, but it had the same two qualities: nasty, and unsettling.

"Lieutenant," one of the uniforms said, behind me; and I turned and answered, "Yeah?" Not the way I usually speak, but this was about as weird a venue, as troubling a set of circumstances as any I'd handled since I'd been promoted to Homicide. "Uh, excuse me, Lieutenant, but what do you want us to do with these three ladies?"

I looked over at them, huddling near the door, and for a moment I hated them. They were taller than I, they were prettier than I, they were certainly wealthier than I, they had no hips and their asses were smaller than mine, and they dressed a lot better. I won't compare cup size: at least I had them beat in that capacity.

"Keep them from talking to each other, but be easy with 'em. I think they're famous, and we've got enough problems in the Department this week." I was talking, of course, about the serial hooker-slayer who had been leaving bits of unrecognizable meat all over town for the preceding six months. Then I went to work. Bird nest smell. Not nice.

The first half dozen were either too wetbrain or demented even to grasp what I was asking them. Clearly, none of them had been out in that alley. But someone *had* been; the old man probably didn't cut his own throat. I'd say definitely, not even possibly.

The first bit of remark that bore any relation to a lead, was the ramble of a guy in his thirties, broke-down like the rest of them, but apparently not as long in the life as his peers. He had been an aerospace worker, laid off at Boeing a few years earlier in one of the periodic "downsizing" ploys.

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His name was Richard. He mumbled his last name and I wrote it on my pad, but I paid less attention than I might've, had he been a real suspect, when he said, "Wull, I seen the green light."

"Green light?"

"Richard. Muh name's Richard."

"Yeah, I got that part. You said 'a green light.'"

"Uh-huh. It was a light, out there, with him, y'know the dead guy?"

I said, yeah, I know the dead guy. "And there was this light. And it was green."

"Uh-huh."

I contemplated a career in orthodonture, as I was already pulling teeth. "Well, look, Richard, you can be of great help to us in solving this murder, if you could just tell me *exactly* what you saw. Out there. In the alley. The green light. Okay?"

He nodded, the poor sonofabitch; and I confess I felt my heart go out to him. He actually was doing the best he could, and I didn't want to push him any more fiercely than common decency would permit. It is probably toasty warm inclinations of a similar sort that will forever block me from becoming one of the Bosses. Oh, well, Lieutenant is a perfectly decent rank to die with.

"I wuz, er, uh..." I read embarrassment.

"Go ahead, Richard, just tell me. Don't be embarrassed."

"Wull, I wuz takin' a leak out back. Around the corner in the alley, but back around the corner, y'know? Back behind where the dumpsters are. An' I wasn't watchin' nothin' else but my own business, an' I heard these girls singing and laughin', and I wuz 'fraid they might come over 'round the back corner an' see me wit' my di...with my pants unzipped..."

"The green light, Richard? Remember: the green light?"

"Uh-huh, I wuz gettin' to that. I zipped up so fast I kinda wet myself, an' I turned around to the back over there, an' all of a sudden there was this green light, big green light, an' I heard the girls screamin' and there was some kinda music, I guess it wuz, an' then allmigawd it was really loud, the girls' screamin', an' I ducked outta there, and went around the dumpsters onna other side, and went over to the fence an' crawled over and come back to the Mission, b'cuz I din't want to get involved, cuz..."

He stopped talking. I had dropped my pencil. I bent to pick it up where

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it had rolled, next to his right foot. I saw his shoes. When I straightened, I looked him in the eye and said, "But you went out there afterward, didn't you, Richard?"

"Nuh-*uh!*" He shook his head violently, but I was looking him right in the eye.

"Before the police came, you went out again, didn't you, Richard?"

His lower lip started to tremble. I felt sorry as hell for the poor slob. He was somebody's son, somebody's brother, maybe even somebody's husband, once upon a layoff; and he was soaked to the skin with cheap wine; and he was scared.

"C'mon, Richard...I *know* you went back, so you might as well tell me what else you remember."

He murmured something so softly, and with such embarrassment, that I had to ask him gently to repeat: "I found the big knife."

"And you took it?"

"Yes'm."

"When you took his shoes."

"Yes'm."

"And anything else?"

"No'mum. I'm sorry."

"That's all right, Richard. Now I want you to go and get me the big knife, and bring it right straight back to this room, and give it to me. I'll have one of the officers go with you."

"Yes'm."

I called for Napoli, and told him to take Richard out to the common room, to retrieve "the big knife." As they started for the door of the smelly little room, Richard turned back to me and started to say, "You gonna take..."

And I stopped him. "No, Richard, no I'm not going to take back those nice shiny new shoes. They look very comfortable, and they're yours. In exchange for the big knife."

He smiled weakly, like a child who knows he's done wrong, is truly abject about it, but is grateful for being let off with just a reprimand.

When he came back, Napoli was carrying "the big knife." I'd expected a grav-knife or a butterfly, something street standard. This was a rusty machete. A big, wide-bladed, cut-down-the-sugar-cane machete. The

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blood that was dried on the blade, all the way up to the handle, was — for certain — some of the same that had been, until recently, billeted in the carotid artery of that old man.

I took the machete gingerly. Napoli had tied a string around the base of the haft, to preserve Richard's — and any others' — prints. I lowered the killing weapon to the table using only the string noose. Then I went back to questioning Richard.

He'd thought he could sell it for some sneaky pete. That's all there was to it. The shoes, because he needed them; and the knife, because it had been left lying there next to the body.

He tried to tell me the story a dozen different ways, but it was always the same. Taking a leak, seeing the green light, running away, coming back and taking the old man's shoes (and socks, as it turned out), swiping the machete while the three women bawled and screamed.

And he went on. For some long while. I gave him a five dollar bill, and told him to get a good dinner over at The Pantry. I'm not ready for this line of work. It's only eleven years; I'm not ready.

DAYS OR WEEKS or millennia later, or maybe it only seemed as quick as that, I was back at the Precinct. I turned the big knife over to Forensics. My feet hurt, and there was a patina of Post-Its all over my desk...and faxes...and memos enough to choke a Coke machine. But the only urgent one was from the M.E. So I handed all the others off to Napoli, and told him to get them squared away, while I went downtown and had a chat with dear Old Doc Death, our coroner. The Boss saw me heading out, and he put those two fingers in his mouth and whistled me to a halt, and yelled across the squadroom, "Have you eaten?"

"Since what time?" I answered.

"Since ever. Go get some dinner."

"I got to go downtown to see Dear Old Doc Death."

"Jacobs," he said, without room for argument, "do as I tell you." I said, yessir, and I went to The Pantry and had a T-bone. Richard of the green light was there, having a meal. He looked happy in his new shoes. I felt a lot better about the universe after that. In your heart of hearts, you think a Richard kind of rummy is going to stoke up on some sweet lucy or a

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tankard of muscatel, and so you just don't dip into the wallet for somebody like that. But every once in a sometime they fool you. This Richard was eating well, so I told the guy behind the cash register not to take his money, that I was paying for it, and Richard could maybe have a second meal, or buy a hat, or get a life. It was easier, after that, to go downtown.

"Not only has his throat been cut literally from ear to ear practically excising his head from his neck, not only was the rip strong and deep enough to sever the carotid, the jugular, *and* the trachea — we're talking someone with heavy-duty *power*! — but I put his age at something over a hundred, maybe a hundred and two, a hundred and ten, maybe a hundred fifty, there's no way of judging something like this, I've never seen anything like it in all my years; but I have to *tell* you that this one-hundred-and-two-year-old corpse, this old man lying here all blue and empty, this old man...is pregnant."

Dear Old Doc Death had hair growing out of his ears. He had a gimp on his starboard side. He did tend to drool and spit a mite when he was deep in conversation or silent communication with (I supposed) the spirits of the departed. But he was an award-winning sawbones. He could smell decay before the milk went sour, before the rot started to manifest itself. If he said this headless horseman was over a hundred years old, I might wrinkle my brow — and have to lave myself with vitamin E moisturizer later that night — but I'd make book he was dead on. Not a good choice of phrase, dead on. Right. I'd bet he was right. Correct.

"What're we talking here, Doc, some kind of artificial insemination?"

He shook his head. "No, not that easy." He breathed heavily, as if he didn't want to move forward with the story. But I caught a whiff of dinner-breath, anyway. Then he spoke very softly, sort of motioning me in closer. Fettucine Alfredo. "Look, Francine, I've been at this forever. But with all I've seen, all I've known of the variety of the human condition...never anything like this. The man has two complete sets of internal organs. Two hearts. Two livers, kidneys, alimentary canals, sixteen sinuses, two complete nervous systems — interlocked and twisting around each other like some insane roller coasters — and one of those sets is female, and the other is male. What we have here is — "

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"Hermaphrodite?"

"*No,* goddamit!" He actually snapped at me. "Not some freak of nature, not some flunked transvestism exercise. What I'm describing to you, Francine, is two complete bodies jammed neatly and working well into one carcass. And the woman in there is about three months' gone with child. I'd say it would have been a perfectly normal — but how am I to know, really — a perfectly normal little girl. Now, all three of them are dead."

We talked for a lot longer. It never got any clearer. It never got any easier to believe. If it had come from anyone but Dear Old Doc Death, I'd've had the teller of the tale wrapped in the big Band-Aid. But who could doubt a man with that much moss coming out of his earholes?

One of the supermodels was Hypatia. Like Iman or Paulina or Vandela. One name. Maybe before the advent of blusher she was something additional, something Polish or Trinidadian, but to eyes that rested on glossy pages of fashion magazines, she was one name. Hypatia.

Candor: I wanted to kill her. No one of the same sex is supposed to look that good after wallowing in an alley, on her knees, in the rain and garbage, amid blood and failure.

"Care to tell me about it?"

She stared back at me across a vast, windy emptiness. I sighed softly. Just once, lord, I thought, just once give me Edna St. Vincent Millay to interrogate, and not Betty Boop.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. Gently. I almost believed she didn't have a clue.

"Well, how about this for a place to begin: you are a pretty famous celebrity, make many hundreds of thousands of dollars just to smile at a camera for a few hours, and you're wearing a Halston suit I'd price at maybe six-five or seven thousand dollars. And you were on Skid Row, outside the Midnight Mission — where the name Donna Karan has never been spoken — kneeling in a pool of blood spilled by an old, old man, and you're crying as if you'd lost your one great love."

"I did."

The other two were equally as helpful. Camilla DelFerro was brave,

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but barely coherent. She was so whacked, she kept mixing her genders, sometimes calling him "her." Angie Rose just kept bawling. They were no help. They just kept claiming they'd loved the old guy, that they couldn't go on without him, and that if they could be permitted, if it wasn't an inconvenience, they would all three like to be buried with him. Dead or alive, our option. Whacked; we're talking whacked here.

And they mentioned, in passing, the green light.

Don't ask.

When I turned in my prelim, the Boss gave me one of his looks. Not the one that suggests you're about to be recycled, or the one that says it's all over for you...the one that says if I had a single wish, it would be that you hadn't put these pages in front of me. He sighed, shoved back his chair, and took off his glasses, rubbing those two red spots on the wings of his nose where the frames pinched. "No one saw anything else? No one with a grudge, a score to settle, a fight over a bottle of wine, a pedestrian pissed off the old guy tried to brace him for loose change?"

I spread my hands. "You've got it there, all of it. The women are of no earthly help. They just keep saying they loved him, and that they can't live without him. In fact, we've got two of them on suicide watch. They might just *not* want to live without him. Boss, I'm at a total loss on this one."

He shoved back from the desk, slid down the chair till his upper weight was resting on his coccyx, and stared at me.

"What?"

He waggled his head, as if to say *nothing, nothing at all.* He reached out an enormous catcher's mitt of a hand and tore a little square off his notepad, wadded it, and began to chew it. Never understood that: kids in home-room with spit-wads, office workers with their minds elsewhere, people chewing paper. Never could figure that out.

"So, if it's nothing, Boss, why d'you keep staring at me like I just fell off the moon or something?"

"When was the last time you got laid, Jacobs?"

I was truly and genuinely shocked. The man was twice, maybe three or four times my age; he walked with a bad limp from having taken an off-duty slug delivered by a kid messing with a 7-Eleven; he was married, with great-grandchildren stacked in egg-crates; and he was Eastern Orthodox Catholic; and he bit his nails. And he chewed paper. I was truly, even genuinely, shocked.

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"Hey, don't we have enough crap flying loose in this house without me having to haul your tired old ass up on sexual *hare*-assment?"

"You wish." He spat soggy paper into the waste basket. "So? Gimme a date, I'll settle for a ballpark figure. Round it off to the nearest decade."

I didn't think this was amusing. "I live the way I like."

"You live like shit."

I could feel the heat in my cheeks. "I don't have to — "

"No; you don't. But I've watched you for a long time, Francine. I knew your step-father, and I knew Andy..."

"Leave Andy out of it. What's done is done."

"Whatever. Andy's gone, a long time now he's been gone, and I don't see you moving along. You live like an old lady, not even with the cat thing; and one of these days they'll find your desiccated corpse stinking up the building you live in, and they'll bust open the door, and there you'll be, all leathery and oozing parts, in rooms filled with old Sunday newspaper sections, like those two creepy brothers..."

"The Collyer Brothers."

"Yeah. The Collyer Brothers."

"I don't think that'll happen."

"Right. And I never thought we'd elect some half-assed actor for President."

"Clinton wasn't an actor."

"Tell that to Bob Dole."

It was wearing thin. I wanted out of there. For some reason all this sidebar crap had wearied me more than I could say. I felt like shit again, the way I'd felt before dinner. "Are you done beating up on me?" He shook his head slowly, wearily.

"Go home. Get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll start all over." I thanked him, and I went home. Tomorrow, we'll start all over. Right at the level of glistening black alleys. I felt like shit.

I was dead asleep, dreaming about black birds circling a garbage-filled alley. The phone made that phlegm-ugly electronic sound its designers thought was reassuring to the human spirit, and I grabbed it on the third. "Yeah?" I wasn't as charming as I might otherwise have been. The voice

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on the other end was Razzia down at the house. "The three women...them models...?"

"Yeah, what about them?"

"They're gone."

"So big deal. They were material witnesses, that's all. We know where to find 'em."

"No, you don't understand. They're *really* gone. As in 'vanished.' Poof! Green light...and gone."

I sat up, turned on the bed lamp. "Green light?"

"Urey had 'em in tow, he was takin' 'em down the front steps, and there was this green light, and Urey's standin' there with his dick in his mitt." He coughed nervously. "In a manner'a speakin'."

I was silent.

"So, uh, Lootenant, they're, uh, like no longer wit' us."

"I got it. They're gone. Poof."

I hung up on him, and I went back to sleep. Not immediately, but I managed. Why not. There was a big knife with a tag on it, in a brown bag, waiting for me; and some blood simples I already knew; there were three supermodels drunk with love who now had vanished in front of everyone's eyes; and we still had an old dead man with his head hanging by a thread.

The Boss had no right to talk to me like that.

I didn't collect old newspapers. I had a subscription to *Time*. And the J. Crew catalogue.

And it was that night, in dreams, that the one real love of my life came to me.

As I lay there, turning and whispering to myself, a woman in her very early forties, tired as hell but quite proud of herself, only eleven years on the force and already a Lieutenant of Homicide, virtually unheard-of, I dreamed the dream of true love.

She appeared in a green light. I understood that...it was part of the dream, from the things the bum Richard had said, that the women had said. In a green light, she appeared, and she spoke to me, and she made me understand how beautiful I really was. She assured me that Angie Rose and Hypatia and Camilla had told her how lovely I was, and how lonely I was, and how scared I was...and we made love.

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If there is an end to it all, I have seen it; I have been there, and I can go softly, sweetly. The one true love of my life appeared to me, like a goddess, and I was fulfilled. The water was cool and clear and I drank deeply.

I realized, as I had not even suspected, that I was tired. I was exhausted from serving time in my own life. And she asked me if I wanted to go away with her, to a place where the winds were cinnamon-scented, where we would revel in each other's adoration till the last ticking moment of eternity.

I said: take me away.

And she did. We went away from there, from that sweaty bedroom in the three-room apartment, before dawn of the next day when I had to go back to death and gristle and puzzles that could only be solved by apprehending monsters. And we went away, yes, we did.

I am very old now. Soon I will no doubt close my eyes in a sleep even more profound than the one in which I lay when she came to release me from a life that was barely worth living. I have been in this cinnamon-scented place for a very long time. I suppose time is herniated in this venue, otherwise she would not have been able to live as long as she did, nor would she have been able to move forward and backward with such alacrity and ease. Nor would the twisted eugenics that formed her have borne such elegant fruit.

I could have sustained any indignity. The other women, the deterioration of our love, the going-away and the coming back, knowing that she...or he, sometimes...had lived whole lives in other times and other lands. With other women. With other men.

But what I could not bear was knowing the child was not mine. I gave her the best eternity of my life, yet she carried that damned thing inside her with more love than *ever* she had shown me. As it grew, as *it* became the inevitable love-object, I withered.

Let her travel with them, whatever love-objects she could satisfy, with whatever was in that dirty paper bag, and let them wail if they choose...but from this dream neither he nor she will ever rise. I am in the green light now, with the machete. It may rain, but I won't be there to see it.

Not this time.

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Ron Goulart's first appearances in our pages came back in 1952, when we ran a parody letter column (April) and then his first story, "Conroy's Public" (December). Very few of the intervening years have passed without at least one story from Mr. Goulart gracing our pages—by his count, we've run fifty-nine stories of his, plus three parodies, three book review columns, and one article. Some of you might recall Heather Moon from her first appearance in the June 1997 issue; if not, you surely won't forget her after this run-in.

How Heather Moon Kept My Life from Getting Completely Fouled up Again

By Ron Goulart

THE MORNING AFTER THE imps invaded the mansion for the second time, I went in and tried to get my copy chief at the advertising agency to switch me immediately to a different project.

"Impossible, inconceivable," Leon Gruskin told me without even looking up from the trade ad proofs atop his wide, cluttered desk top. "We need your unique copywriting capabilities on our upcoming pitch to get the Sunnyland Cigarettes account here at the shop, Harkins. We're talking about a potential billing of $12,000,000 a year."

"Even so, Leon, I have some personal reasons why — "

"Exactly. Exactly, now get back to your office and get cracking on some fresh ideas for a Sunnyland TV campaign. We have to make the damn presentation to the Sunnyland people in just ten days, remember?"

This all happened some years ago, when I was a young advertising copywriter with sufficient hair and a lot of potential and they still allowed cigarette advertising on television.

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Instead of returning to my cubicle, I wandered into the Art Department to talk to Andy Lenzman. From his single narrow window you could, if you pressed against the pane, hunched and tilted somewhat to the left, actually get a glimpse of Madison Avenue far below. A lot of Manhattan ad agencies had their offices on Madison Avenue in those days. Maybe they still do, I don't keep up.

Lenzman was a small, lean man in his early thirties with crinkly, short-cropped dark hair. He later became, I think, a moderately successful gallery painter. I'm pretty sure I read someplace about ten years ago that they showed some of his work at the Museum of Modern Art. I haven't stayed in touch with him, but at the time he was my closest friend at the ad agency.

He pushed back from his drawing board, where he was roughing out a newspaper ad for Hopps Bros. Beer. "What's happening?"

"I'm doomed." I shut the door and sat in his only other chair after moving a tumble of empty OatBursts Cereal boxes.

"Alimony trouble again?"

"No, nope, I got my lawyer to make a deal with Sue's shyster out in California." Sue Smith had been my college sweetheart and I'd made the mistake of marrying her. I told you about that once.

"Then it must be Marny Olmstead," he said, tapping absently on his board with his charcoal pencil. "I believe I warned you about having anything to do with a lady who copywrites for a rival agency. If memory serves, there's a law against it. Something to do with cross-pollination and the basic laws of — "

"It's not Marny. Fact is, I'm seeing her this Saturday."

He made the sort of face you make when you taste something sour. "Was Typhoid Mary busy?"

I leaned forward in the chair. "It's imps, far as I can tell."

"Hum?" He dropped the charcoal pencil into the trough at the bottom of his board. "Imps?"

I replied, "Right, imps. They're attacking the mansion, plaguing me, eating all the Sunnyland Cigarettes ad copy I type up, making rude and threatening remarks."

"C'mon, Will, you're supposed to be the top copywriter here at Hannigan, Arnold & Bolderwood," Andy told me. "You can come up with

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a better excuse than that for missing a deadline — 'The imps ate my homework.'" He shook his head, indicating disappointment in me. "What, by the way, *are* imps?"

"Well, the ones who materialize at my Cousin Phil's mansion in Southport, Connecticut, are sort of — "

"Materialize?"

"Yeah, these things appear out of the air with a sort of popping sound," I explained. "All over the house, but the biggest flock of them frequents the den where I'm trying to work at night. They make mildly explosive noises, coming and going."

"That figures, I guess," he said, nodding slowly. "I mean, you wouldn't expect imps to ring the doorbell, tip their hats and say, 'Hi, we're the imps come to eat us some advertising copy.' What did you say imps were?"

"I looked them up at the library, after they told me who they were — imps are sort of junior grade demons who hang out in the netherworld," I explained. "Mine are about the size and shape of piglets. Except not at all cuddly."

"Right, you wouldn't expect an imp to be cuddly."

"They're a sort of sooty gray in color and have a lot of extra teeth, sharp and spiky."

"The better to eat your copy."

"The problem is I don't have time to do all my regular copy assignments here at the office plus the extra stuff for the Sunnyland pitch," I went on. "So I have to work at home, too, until we make the presentation."

Andy glanced at his closed door. "They haven't followed you to work, far as you know?"

"Not yet, nope. Of course, they only started manifesting themselves night before last for the first time."

He nodded again, even more slowly. "Well, since they haven't popped up at the agency, why not work late here? That is, if you're really seeing imps and haven't simply come down with a severe case of advanced heebie-jeebies."

"I think they only come out at night. So they might show up here, too, if — "

"Fine then. You could drag Gruskin — your esteemed copy chief

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works until the wee hours most nights — into your office and point at them," he suggested. "'Here, sir, is why my copy is coming in late and with teeth marks all over it.' About how many show up of an evening?"

I shrugged and it turned into a small shudder. "Not sure, Andy," I admitted. "It's tough to get an accurate count, since they move around a lot, making threats and all and — "

"Your imps can talk?" There was something in his tone now that indicated he was still not quite sure that I hadn't simply gone stark raving bonkers.

"In little piping voices, sort of falsetto, yeah. With Swedish accents."

"Is that standard operating procedure for imps?" He inquired, eyeing me. "The Swedish accent part?"

"No, I suspect they're just doing that to annoy me," I told my friend. "Hearing dozens of porcine imps warning you not to write any copy about Sunnyland Cigarettes can be pretty unsettling. The fact that they start most sentences with 'Yumpin' yimminy' just adds to the horror." I gave a forlorn shake of my head.

"Wait now — it's only the Sunnyland account these little dorks are ticked off about? They don't care if you keep writing about OatBursts and Terry's Permanent-in-a-Box?" He was tapping his board with his pencil again. "There are, you know, a whole stewpot of other agencies going after the Sunnyland Cigarettes account. Maybe someone at one of our rivals has put a hex on you."

"That's what I suspect, sure, because the imps imply they'll depart if I quit working on the Sunnyland pitch," I said. "Thing is, Andy, who the hell is behind it? I haven't got any idea."

"Isn't Helfant & Associates also trying for that account?"

"Marny's ad agency? No, not that I know of."

"You certain?"

"She would've told me. We are, after all, pretty close."

He watched me for a few silent seconds. "You don't seem goofy, Will," he conceded finally.

"I'm not nuts," I assured him. "I've had experience with supernatural stuff before, so I'm damn sure this — "

"When was that, old buddy?"

"Nine years ago, when I was going to Brimstone University," I

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answered. "A professor sent some demons to persuade me to stay away from Sue, because he was trying to court her and — "

"Sounds like a splendid guy. You should've heeded his — "

"I'm trying to convey to you that I know something about occult matters."

"Okay, so how did you get away from those other demons? These were full-size demons, not the piglet versions?"

I held my right hand as high above my head as I could stretch. "Tall guys. Mean-minded and, in most cases, fire-breathing."

"And you shook them off how?"

I walked over to his window, trying to get a glimpse of the morning Madison Avenue. "A friend helped me."

"How?"

"Well, she had quite a few supernatural powers herself, but in a white magic sort of way," I answered quietly. "Whole family, on both sides, was magical in one way or other."

"She? Was she cute?"

I kept facing the window. "She was, yes. In fact, if I'd had any sense back then..." I let the sentence trail off.

"You're still pining for her."

I turned toward him. "No, I got over that," I assured him. "She went up against this professor and, with some help from her family, defeated him. I haven't seen her since I graduated."

"But, look, old buddy, you're house-sitting in that mansion in Connecticut while your cousin frolics in Paris and — "

"Phil is frolicking in Majorca for a year."

"Be that as it may, you're residing in Southport and that's less than a hour drive from Brimstone," Andy continued. "Therefore, just get your butt over to Brimstone and look up this — what did you say her name was?"

"Heather Moon."

"Okay, you go and talk to Heather Moon. Apologize for not keeping in touch, then mention that you're mixed up with demons again," he advised. "Emphasize that it's only just *small* demons this time. Would she, for old times' sake, mind helping you shoo them out of your life? That's what old friends are for and — "

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"I can't do that," I told him. "Chiefly because I don't have any notion where the hell Heather is. She left Connecticut right after college — and her family moved to Maine or Vermont four five years back."

"Shouldn't be too tough to track her down. That's what I'd — " The phone sitting on his taboret started to ring. He picked up the receiver. "Louvre City. How can we help youse?" Andy listened for half a minute and handed the phone toward me. "For you. Sounds like a Swede."

I took it, swallowed and spoke. "Yeah?"

"You bane better not bring Heather Moon into this, by yingo," warned an imp and hung up.

BY THE TIME I got home to the Southport mansion that night, darkness had fallen and it was raining. I parked my Nash in Cousin Phil's big, shadowy three-car garage and went sprinting along the white gravel drive and up the wide steps to the front door.

Hesitating before I inserted the key, I glanced back at the Sound, which you could glimpse over the top of the high stone wall my absent cousin had built around his acre and a half of tree-filled property. The foam on the dark water glowed faintly. Taking a slow deep breath in and out, I opened the front door of the sprawling Victorian mansion.

There was only silence and darkness beyond the threshold. No sound of imp activity. I inhaled and exhaled again, then entered.

Gingerly, I clicked on the overhead lights in the long, paneled hallway.

No imps.

There was a vinegar smell that I noticed now, strong enough to overpower the strong antiseptic odor of the furniture polish Cousin Phil had made me promise to apply to every single stick of furniture in the whole damn twenty-one room mansion at least once a week. I didn't recall the imps smelling vinegary, but I, nevertheless, scanned the corridor for any sign of them.

From the kitchen came a forlorn meowing. "Those assholes," I observed.

Part of my house-sitting duties involved looking after two resident cats. They were fat and lazy, disdainful toward me. Since the invasion of

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the imps two nights earlier, they spent most of their time in seclusion, behind furniture, under beds, and hunkered in closets and cabinets.

"George? Ira?" I called, my voice sounding a little quivery.

More mewing from the kitchen.

Making my way there, I located George, who was the color of stale peanut butter, cowering under the sink. "C'mon, fella," I urged, squatting and reaching for him. "I'll feed you and, if we can locate him, your accomplice."

Hissing, George slapped at my extended hand with his clawed forepaw.

"Yow," I remarked, yanking my hand out of range and standing. "Okay, I'll put some cat food in a dish. You emerge when you're in the mood, schmuck."

They'd only eat Kittytonic Kat Banquet #2, an expensive concoction that cost thirty-five cents a can. We had a cat food account at Hannigan, Arnold & Bolderwood and I could've gotten sacks of it free, but Phil had insisted that George and Ira be fed only Kittytonic Kat Banquet #2 and, once a week, Kittytonic Kat Banquet #3. Both cats, for some reason, loathed Kittytonic Kat Banquet #1, even though it contained tuna. Under the deal I'd made with my cousin, I had to pay for all the pet food.

I opened the immense refrigerator and took out an opened tin of cat food. I was spooning it into the special pewter dish that had *George* engraved on the side in Gothic script when the telephone rang.

That sudden shrilling in the rainswept mansion made me straighten up and stiffen, causing me to plop a spoonful of Kittytonic Kat Banquet #2 on the spotless white linoleum.

I walked over to where the phone was supposed to be and noticed that it didn't seem to be there. That is, I couldn't see it but I could still hear it ringing.

"Very funny," I said aloud, assuming this was another imp stunt. "Invisible telephone. Clever."

I prodded the air with my hand until I connected with the receiver. My first attempt to answer wasn't successful since I was apparently talking into the wrong end.

"Hello?" I said when I finally got it right side up.

"Working away, are we?" asked Leon Gruskin, my copy chief.

"Just got home."

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"Speak up, Will. You're talking too far from the mouthpiece."

"I am? Sorry." I tried to get the invisible phone closer to my face, giving myself a hard smack in the teeth. "Ow. That better?"

"I just had a brainstorm," he announced.

People who worked in the Creative Departments of advertising agencies back then had frequent brainstorms. Maybe they still do. I have no idea what they call them now.

"Which is?" I inquired.

George had emerged from under the sink. After giving me an intense evil-eye scowl, he waddled over to the glob of spilled food and began nibbling at it.

"How does this line hit you, Will? 'Sunnyland Cigarettes — There's magic in every puff.' Well?"

I was watching the cat and listening to the heavy night rain slam at the high, wide windows. "Magic?"

"Makes them forget about tar and irritation."

"Yeah, Leon, but it doesn't especially fit with the 'Let Sunnyland put some sunshine in your life' theme I'm working with."

"This supplements that. We use it in some separate television spots that you'll write," he explained. "Have you seen Harry Firedrake, Jr., yet?"

"I don't think so. Who the hell is he?"

"The famous magician."

"Not that famous. I've never heard — "

"He's playing at the Gotham Theatre on West 43rd. Show is called *Oh, What A Magical Night!* And it's terrific," continued Gruskin. "He does a Floating Lady variation that's sensational and would look great in a commercial. This cute little assistant he works with would be floating there with a cigarette in her hand. Firedrake, Jr., gestures with his wand and the cigarette lights up. She starts puffing, expresses contentment. We dolly in on the magician and he says, "Sunnyland Cigarettes — There's magic in every puff.' What do you think, my boy?"

"Golly, I'm sold. Rush me a carton of Sunnyland Cigarettes and put it on my tab."

"Let's be serious. I'm not busting my ass after office hours just so you can be inspired to make wiseass remarks."

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"Sorry, sir." Probably talking into an invisible phone was making me uneasy and even more flippant than usual.

"You're going to see the Firedrake show tomorrow night," I was informed. "Angelica and I saw him Saturday night and I've been kicking around this magic idea ever since."

"Who's Angelica?"

"My wife."

"I thought your wife was named Georgine."

"That was my first wife, two years ago. We'll have to have lunch more often, Will," he said. "There'll be a pair of tickets for you at the box office. Bring your wife."

"I've been divorced for several years, Leon," I mentioned. "But I'll get a date. And maybe tomorrow you can fill me in a little more on the magic angle of this campaign."

"Happy to, my boy. Good night."

It only took me two tries to get the phone hung up.

All the telephones were invisible. After very carefully entering my den and typing myself a memo about Leon Gruskin's half-witted magician notion, I decided to phone Marny.

That meant feeling around my desk top for nearly five minutes before I located the phone. The imps had also made my coffee cup invisible, which caused me to spill cold coffee all across my desk blotter. You couldn't see the stuff, but there was a wide splotch of invisible sogginess.

"Hello, love," answered Marny in that throaty voice of hers.

"How'd you know it was me?"

"That greeting would fit any one of eight other guys, Will."

I laughed, fairly sure she was kidding. "Listen, Marny, the agency is interested in a magician named Harry Firedrake, Jr. I've got two tickets to see his show tomorrow night in Manhattan and — "

"Already saw him, darling. He is marvelous, although the skinny girl he's got assisting him is abysmal."

"Care to see him yet again? We could meet after work, have an early dinner and — "

"Oh, that sounds great, Will," she said, sounding sincerely regretful, "but my masters at Helfant & Associates have me booked to go to dinner

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with a client. I can't duck it, darling. A real shame, too, since I just bought some new frilly black lingerie I was anxious to have you see."

I swallowed once. "That is a pity, yeah," I agreed. "By the way, sweetheart, I heard a rumor that your agency was going to pitch the Sunnyland account, too."

"Bullshit, darling," she said. "Wouldn't I have confided in you if we were competing? Sure, I would, since I'm the tobacco-expert there and I'd be the one doing the sample stuff. Or don't you trust me anymore?"

"I do, forget it. Just a rumor," I assured her.

"I've got to ring off now, love. I brought a ton of crap home to work on. Maybe we can squeeze in lunch tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow. I've got to go over to Newark to the OatBursts plant to see their new — "

"Soon then. And we're still going to the Connecticut Ad Club banquet on Saturday, aren't we?"

"Absolutely."

"The undies will keep until then, don't worry. Night, darling."

Ira had come lumbering into the office while I was hanging up the unseen phone. Giving a disgruntled meow, the heavy cat leaped up on the desk, avoided the unseen damp spot, and sat down on his haunches.

"I'll feed you in a minute," I promised.

The furry orange cat said, "What I really wanted to see you about, by yimminy, was your refusal to quit the Sunnyland project. We aren't kidding, you know."

"A goddamned imp." I grabbed up a wooden three-foot ruler and tried to swat him.

Chuckling, the imp made a popping noise and vanished.

"Damn, now they're doing impersonations."

When I leaped up out of my theater seat, Andy Lenzman grabbed my arm and managed to get me back in a seated position.

"I told you you shouldn't have had curry for dinner," he said.

I pointed, vigorously, at the stage. "That's her," I said, excited.

"I know, it's the Floating Lady," said my friend. "Which isn't all that surprising since Firedrake just announced he was going to perform his astounding version of the Floating Lady Illusion."

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"Hush up," suggested someone behind us.

After turning to scowl at all the occupants of the seats immediately behind us, I hunched down and told Andy, "What I mean is, that's Heather up there."

"Heather Moon?"

"That Heather, yeah."

"Well, that's sort of uncanny, Will."

"I wonder if it is."

"Be quiet, will you?"

I turned again, glaring. "You don't need to *hear* magic, putz."

"Don't call my wife a putz, peckerhead."

"Sorry, I thought I was addressing you. If your wife didn't have a bass voice, people might not confuse her with a stevedore or — "

"She's a soprano, you ninny."

"Folks," put in Andy, "let's call a truce and watch this incredible illusion, huh?"

It was such an impressive trick that I suspected Heather was contributing some real magic to it.

Harry Firedrake, Jr., an overly handsome bearded man in his early forties, had begun his magic show with the Floating Lady. The moment he mentioned that he did the trick in an unconventional way, Heather, looking absolutely terrific in a flowing white gown, had materialized high above the stage of the Gotham Theatre.

She was in a horizontal position, arms at her side, her long auburn hair fluttering slightly as she slowly descended. That was the point where I recognized her and shot up out of my seat.

By the time I was paying attention again, she had reached the level of the tailcoated magician's top-hatted head. Firedrake passed a golden hoop over her body to demonstrate that there were no wires holding her. I would've believed that without any demonstration. I knew Heather didn't need any help in levitating.

What I didn't understand, though, was why she was working with a stage magician, a guy who specialized in tricks and fake magic.

We were in the twenty-first row of the orchestra section and I wanted a better look at Heather. "Opera glasses," I requested, holding out my palm toward my friend.

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"Didn't bring any, old buddy."

"See if you can borrow a pair. I want — "

"Here, peckerhead." The guy behind me was whapping me on the shoulder with a pair of binoculars. "Use mine and, in the name of God, keep your mouth tight shut."

Making a surly noise, I yanked the proffered glasses from his hand.

Heather, who was standing beside Firedrake now, was as slim and pretty as I'd remembered her. She did look a few years older, but not very different from the girl I'd known back in college.

"Jesus," I murmured.

"What?" asked Andy.

"Nothing." I shook my head. I'd all at once realized how much I missed Heather and how supremely dumb I'd been to marry Sue Smith and abandon Heather.

Up on the stage Heather turned to the audience and bowed. There was considerable applause.

Firedrake took her hand, bent and kissed it.

She curtsied, smiled, then her body began to shimmer. In less than thirty seconds she had vanished from the stage.

Dropping the opera glasses into my jacket pocket, I stood up again. "Be back in a while," I whispered to Andy and started down the aisle toward the stage.

"Hey, jerk, my glasses."

"You'll get them back, don't fret."

Crouched low, I hurried for the exit door next to the bright-lit stage. I pushed it open as unobtrusively as possible, strode down the dim-lit corridor beyond and through a door that led backstage.

In the wings, sitting on a fat wardrobe trunk, was a teenage boy wearing a turban and a star-studded robe.

"I'd like to see Heather Moon," I told him.

"I know," he replied. "We've been expecting you, Will."

She smiled, but it wasn't much more than a polite smile. "It's nice to see you again after all this time," said Heather, glancing at the small black alarm clock ticking on her dressing room table.

"Yeah, it's nice seeing you, too," I said. "When do you have to get back on stage?"

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"Fifteen minutes, for the Chinese Cabinet Illusion." She was sitting in a wooden chair, her slim back to the mirror, wearing a pale terrycloth robe and looking very pretty.

Even though I was with her again, I was feeling a sense of loss. Mostly I was regretting the years away from her. "The kid out there mentioned that you were expecting me, Heather."

"Didn't you recognize my brother Buddy?"

"That was him? As I recall, I never actually saw Buddy."

"Oh, yes, that's right. He was going through that phase where he thought it was cute to remain invisible."

I sat, uneasy, in the small room's only other chair. It was a lumpy green armchair and it produced a mournful twang. "Did you rig this somehow, so that I'd come here?"

Heather nodded. "Yes, I planted the idea in your copychief's mind — I don't know why you let him browbeat you, he's got a very easy brain to control. Well, anyway, I planted the notion that he ought to use Harry in some commercials."

I made a relieved noise. "Then I won't really have to write some godawful spots about Sunnyland Cigarettes being magical?"

"He'll not even remember the idea by tomorrow." Heather looked again at the clock. "I hesitated about intruding in your life again, Will, considering what happened after — "

"It wasn't you who screwed up my life. You saved it. What I did afterward was what screwed everything up."

"My grandfather — do you remember Grandpa Plum? He had one of his visions and contacted me. That's how I got interested in your problem in the first place," Heather explained, standing and moving toward a screen.

"Sure, he's the one who levitates a lot."

"Gramps doesn't do that much anymore. He's getting old and his sense of direction is futzed up." She stepped behind the screen. "He keeps bumping into walls and furniture all the time now. Excuse me while I get into my next costume."

"Your grandfather got one of those messages from the spirit world, did he?"

"His main contact on the other side these days is a very gabby woman named Mrs. Rasmussen. She was a chiropractor in this world but she's

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proved to be very reliable." I saw the yellow robe drop to the floor beneath the screen. "She alerted him to the fact you were in trouble again."

"This time it isn't my fault that I'm being plagued by demons, Heather." When I left the armchair it made another mournful wang. "They're *small* demons, by the way. Technically, you'd call them imps."

"I know, Will. I had my mother summon up some background material."

"Your mother's okay?

"Fine, yes. They're living in Quincy, Massachusetts — Mom and my dad and assorted relatives."

"I thought it was Maine." I eased nearer the screen. Heather was still apparently using that sandalwood scent she'd worn in college. "Or possibly Vermont."

"Massachusetts." Heather, wearing a spangled crimson bathing suit, stepped free of the screen. "I arranged for there to be two tickets available for you and then used some telepathic persuasion on your boss. Did you bring your lady friend?"

"She had something else to do tonight. I persuaded a friend of mine — guy who's an Art Director at the agency — to come along."

"I don't want to intrude," she said again. "But I told myself that if you came back to see me — then it would mean you could use a little help."

"Right now I could use an unlimited quantity of help, serious help," I assured her. "For some reason I have these imps overflowing my — "

"It's because of the work you're doing on the Sunnyland Cigarettes presentation."

"It is, huh? Yeah, that's what Andy — Andy Lenzman, the Art Director — suggested, too. But why?"

"You have a reputation as a crackerjack copywriter, Will," she told me, taking a spangled crimson cape off a hook on the wall. "One of your rival agencies, using some black magic, has learned that as long as you're turning out the copy, your agency is going to get the account. So they're working to sideline you."

"Which agency?"

She handed me the cape, turned away from me. I placed it on her shoulders and she fastened it with a golden cord. "I don't have all the details on that yet," she said finally. "I can, however, get rid of your imps for you. Unless you'd rather tackle the job yourself?"

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"No; nope, not at all." Realizing I still had my hands on her shoulders, I swallowed and stepped back. "I'd really appreciate it, Heather. They're messing up my work. And I'm not sleeping very well and the cats — my halfwit cousin named them George and Ira — are spending most of their days cringing."

She faced me. "I can come out to your place tonight," she offered. "A little shy of midnight."

I noticed she still had freckles, a faint scattering of them. "That would be great," I told her. "I can pick you up after the show. We can get a train at Grand Central, ride out to Southport together."

She shook her head. "I don't like to travel by train," she said. "You just go on home to the mansion. I'll meet you there. Okay?"

I nodded. "Fine," I said. "Oh, one other thing — how come somebody with *real* magic powers is working in a fake magic show like this one?"

"I have to go on now." She tilted and kissed me, very lightly and briefly, on the cheek. She left her dressing room.

I lingered there for a moment, reflecting, yet again, on how dimwitted I'd been back in college.

THE IMPS SHOWED UP promptly at 11:30 P.M., just as the big grandfather clock in the hall of my cousin's mansion was bonging for the half hour.

I was in the kitchen, attempting once again to figure out how Cousin Phil's coffee maker worked. I'd stopped at the little grocery store near the Southport train station on the way home and picked up a couple packages of fancy cookies. Those I'd arranged on one of my Cousin Phil's silver serving dishes on the kitchen table.

Maybe Heather wouldn't have time for coffee and cookies, but I decided I ought to make some effort to play the host.

"By yingo, why'd you bane buy these stale cookies, yunior?"

Turning my attention from the cryptic coffee machine, I saw a single imp sprawled in the midst of the plate of cookies, nibbling on a macaroon.

"Shoo, you son of a bitch." Grabbing up a spatula, I started toward the butcher block table to swat him.

But before I reached my goal, a flock of piglike little imps appeared

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suddenly on the kitchen floor. They succeeded in tripping me up and I fell, with an oofing exclamation, on the white linoleum.

A bunch of them hopped on my back, started tap-dancing.

"You know what these crappy cookies need to pep them up, Olaf?"

"What, Sven?"

"Kittytonic Kat Banquet #1 spread atop them."

"By yingo, you bane be right."

As I struggled to rise, I heard the refrigerator being opened.

"I don't see no Kittytonic Kat Banquet #1, Oley," piped one of the imps. "But there sure bane a whole shitpot of Kittytonic Kat Banquet #2." An opened can of cat food was tossed out of the refrigerator.

"Hey, you porkish little schmucks," I shouted, halfway to my feet, "we don't have any goddamned Kittytonic Kat Banquet #1."

"Let's settle for Kittytonic Kat Banquet #2, Sven."

"It doesn't have the right tang, Olaf."

Growling, I pushed all the way upright, shedding imps.

"Hot dog, this bane be lots of fun," cried several of them as they started bouncing, in a rubber ball sort of way, on the wide white floor.

I eased over toward the doorway, trying to avoid smacking into a bouncing imp.

Making a sudden dash, I dived out into the hall. I slammed the door.

I started running along the shadowy hallway. Maybe I could make it to the porch and wait for Heather there.

The door of my den came flapping open and a dozen or more of the two-foot-high imps came dancing out, Rockette style. Each was dressed as a package of Sunnyland Cigarettes.

"If you know what for you bane good," they sang in off key unison, "you'll move your ass from the neighborhood. The Sunnyland account ain't for you and to pursue it will fill your life with rue."

"Christ, it's not bad enough you intrude on me," I said, glaring down at the cluster of them, "now you inflict godawful jingles."

Another batch of them danced into view, porky legs kicking in sync. "You better quit the Sunnyland job, chump," all the imps chorused. "Otherwise it gives..." They all made a slicing noise together and a throat-cutting gesture. I couldn't see their actual throats because of the mockup cigarette packages they were wearing.

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"Listen, guys, you're in for some big trouble," I warned. "I'm having you exorcised shortly. If you scoot while you can, you can avoid getting incinerated or having to spend the rest of your days in Limbo or someplace worse."

One of the imps was shedding his package, wriggling out of it, grunting. Tossing it aside finally, he glared up at me with his piggy little eyes, snout wrinkled disdainfully. "We warned you not to drag Heather Moon into this," he said in his chirping voice. "Now her sad fate is on your hands, yunior."

"What the hell do you mean?" I squatted, eyeing him.

"Show him, gang."

Another wave of them, fifteen at least, came tumbling out of the den, collaborating on the carrying of a large funeral wreath. The black ribbon that stretched across its blend of withered flowers and limp ferns said, in gilt letters, *Rest in Peace — Heather Moon.*

"If you little bastards have — "

"Relax, Will. Don't let them flimflam you." Heather had simply appeared in the paneled hall.

She was wearing a plaid skirt and a cardigan sweater, her auburn hair was tied back with a twist of green ribbon. Carried in her right hand was a battered attaché case.

"Woe betide." The imp who'd been trying to con me now pointed a fat warning finger at her. "Flee this cursed place before you, too, meet your doom."

"Oh, shush," advised Heather, kneeling beside the case.

The imps, despite the bluster of their spokesman, were uneasy. Little pig feet shuffling, they backed toward the open door of the den. They'd abandoned the wreath and some of the ones wearing cigarette boxes were stumbling over it.

Heather produced a squat orange candle that rested in a heavy brass candle holder, set it on the hardwood floor with a confident snap of her wrist. "Light it, Will," she suggested as she fetched a thick, leatherbound old book out of the case.

"You don't want to risk that, yunior," warned the imp.

Patting my pockets, I located a lighter. Until I'd been stuck on the Sunnyland project three weeks earlier, I hadn't smoked in nearly five years. My hand was shaking some as I crouched and got the candle going.

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"Easy, Will, nothing bad's going to happen."

"That's what you think, you freckle-faced slut," said a familiar voice.

I straightened up, blinking. "What the hell are you doing here, Marny?"

"Oh, be still, you nitwit," Marny advised. She was a very attractive dark-haired woman in her late twenties. Tonight, when she materialized out of a cloud of deep gray smoke in my Cousin Phil's hallway, she was wearing a long black cloak and her face seemed exceptionally white.

"Boy, I *am* a nitwit," I admitted, having been hit with a sudden, and rather late coming, insight. "You're the one behind all these imps. You're the one who wants me off the Sunnyland pitch. And your ad agency *is* going after that account, too."

"Obviously, asshole." She took two steps closer to Heather. "That'll be enough of that spell, Little Miss Magic."

"What are you?" I inquired. "A sorceress or a — "

"She's a witch, a traditional witch," supplied Heather, rising up and opening her book to a place that had been marked with a faded strip of crimson cloth. "There are at least three other advertising agencies in Manhattan who employ one."

"Dating me," I said, angry, "was just so you could spy for Helfant & Associates. All these weeks you've been — "

"Silence." Marny rose up on tiptoe. She was wearing glistening black boots and her cape began to flutter, as though she was standing in a strong wind.

Raising her arms to breast level, she stretched them out straight and pointed all ten of her red-tipped fingers at Heather.

Smiling, Heather ignored her and started reading, slowly and deliberately, a spell from the ancient book. This one sounded like it was in Spanish, with a few Latin phrases thrown in.

"Yumping yimminy," muttered the now-frightened imps. They then started producing unpleasant popping noises as they exploded away into nothing.

Heather nodded and turned to another page in her book.

There were no more imps to be seen.

But Marny, her eyes glowing an intense glittering green, was still there and murmuring a spell of her own.

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"Watch it, Heather," I warned. "She's trying to — "

"Don't fret, I was expecting she'd show up here." Heather started reciting the new spell.

The whole damned house was shaking now, walls rattling, lamps jangling.

"You won't live to finish that," warned Marny. From her fingertips came thin, crackling lines of intense yellowish light.

They never reached Heather or the book, though.

Because all at once Marny turned into thousands of flickering specks of deep black. The dark flecks swirled around the place where she'd been standing, flickering before they fell into the shadows and were gone.

"Is she permanently destroyed?" I asked in a very small voice.

"Nope, she's just relocated to elsewhere."

I leaned back against the wall. A few particles of black had landed on the clawfooted mail table. Absently I started to brush them away, until I remembered what they were. "Thanks, Heather. The ad game can get pretty intense and competitive sometimes."

After extinguishing the candle, she packed it away in the attaché case and shut the book in with it. "You really have to be more careful about the women you keep company with."

"I've been..." Then I noticed that she had a dark bruise on her left cheek. "They hurt you. Let me get a — "

"It's nothing, didn't happen here," she said, touching at her cheek. "I just had a little accident at the theater."

Reaching out, I took hold of her hand. "What I wanted to say," I said, "is that I made a mistake back there in college. But after seeing you again, Heather, I know what the smart thing to do is."

I tightened my grip on her hand.

"We all of us make mistakes, Will. Mine was marrying Harry Firedrake three years ago," Heather said quietly.

Then she wasn't there anymore.

For quite a while I just stood there, watching the place where Heather had been. Then, after muttering "Well, yumpin' yiminy," I went to find the cats and tell them it was safe to come out of hiding.

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Judith Merril was one of science fiction's most influential figures as a writer, critic, anthologist, and fan. She is well remembered for her novel Shadow on the Hearth *and for such stories as "That Only a Mother" and "Dead Center" (her first for us, in the Nov. 1954 issue), but in truth, her biggest influence probably came as an anthologist and through the book column she contributed from 1965 to 1969.*

When she died in 1997, Judy left her memoirs incomplete. Fortunately her granddaughter Emily has been transcribing tapes and assembling notes into a whole. This section was the most polished of them all and beautifully captures a small part of the sf scene in the 1940s. A portion of this essay appeared previously in The New York Review of Science Fiction, *but the entirety of it has never before been published.*

A [Real?] Writer — Homage to Ted Sturgeon

By Judith Merril

I WAS SLOW.

I cannot remember a time when I did not write. My first publication was not until I was seven — a poem in a mimeoed summer camp newspaper — but I have a ghost of a memory of a rare quarrel with my father much earlier. I must have been four, had just learned to read, and was demanding half his desk space because I was a writer too — or thought I was.

Then at fifteen I discovered that my mother intended me to be a writer, had been raising me specifically to be a writer — a writer like my father. So I quit — or thought I did.

I kept on writing for the high school paper, and edited the yearbook. During my single year at University, my main activity was working on the school paper; I was also writing for the Trotzkyist *Challenge of Youth*, but that was all journalism and politics, not [what I thought of as] *Writing*. When I was twenty-one and a mother myself, and had the width of a continent between me and my own mother, I started writing seriously again.

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Almost all writers — almost all artists — are, to some degree, rebels. Some [non-realist] romantics like to talk about the role of poverty and "suffering" in the making of an artist. The truth is both poverty and agonizing frustration are close to inevitable in any apprenticeship to any of the arts, in any culture, at any time. Rebelliousness — the reckless rejection of society's manners and morals, of authority, tradition and, above all, security — is basic to survival during the life-in-a-garret phase.

Some people, and I am one, also believe that art is by nature revolutionary: that a vital function of the artist is to produce and publish "virtual realities" of social change. Certainly the inverse is true: no radical change can ever occur until a believable and seductive new vision is made public. Professors and politicians may seduce, but only artists can create belief in the new vision — the new myth. [Bear in mind: Artists — well, artistes — include great orators — and demagogues.]

So: Rebellion is inherent in the artist? The artist is an essential element of revolution? A rebellious nature is simply a useful defense against the scurvy treatment visited on student-artists in every society? Why quibble? By any and all reckonings, rebellion is part of the job description.

"Authority" expected me to become a writer. So I was slow.

In 1944, when I started "writing" again, I was a camp-following sailor's wife in San Francisco: Danny, my comrade/husband, was in a radar technician training course on Treasure Island. That summer, the records of Dan's political activities [most especially his union-activism while working in a defense plant] caught up with his Navy files, and he was pulled abruptly out of radar school to be shipped overseas. He avoided assignment to the suicidal Pacific beachhead landings by volunteering for the submarine service. He went to Pearl Harbor and I went back to New York with our almost-two-year-old baby girl, Merril.

I found part-time work doing research and a bit of ghostwriting. [That wasn't "being a Writer."] Then I met the Futurians, a group of determinedly rebellious, mostly left-wing, science-fiction fans just in the process of becoming professionals. Like every other social and professional grouping, the Futurian Society of New York had been fragmented

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by the war, but there were still a few service-rejects in the city, clustered loosely around three central figures: Johnny Michel, "Doc" Lowndes, and Donald Wollheim. Johnny was, by Futurian consensus, the brilliant young writer of the group. Wollheim and Lowndes had already achieved their first, shabby, editorial jobs.

Doc was a shoestring editor at a chain of particularly low-paying pulp magazines, mostly westerns and detectives. One of my research jobs was on the history of the Old West, and Doc started buying short filler articles from me. Then he and Johnny both began pointing out that I could make much more money out of the same material by turning some of the anecdotes into stories.

I had never written fiction. I told them I didn't know how to write a story. They said, write one and we'll tell you what's wrong with it. I said I didn't want to write westerns. They said, okay, try a detective. I did. They tore it apart. I rewrote. They suggested a few more changes. I did them and Doc bought it for *Crack Detective Magazine.*

I wrote to Dan:

Monday morning
February 19th, 1945
W-Day plus one

Sir:

Hereafter in addressing your wife, you will kindly restrain yourself to the use of the official title, "Oh most revered, high and worshipful Professional Hack Writer."

DOC BOUGHT MY STORY LAST NIGHT — beyond dispute or further question, finished, as is, and to undergo no more than the customary amount of editorial revision.

DOC BOUGHT MY STORY LAST NIGHT. It remains now only for him to catch hold of the publisher long enough to get a check signed. 3200 words — I stand to gain exactly 32 bux....

***

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I still wasn't sure about becoming a *real* Writer, but this was only hack stuff after all: a demonstrably learnable skill, writing "formula" for a cheap commercial market.

With my new semi-pro status, I was voted into the Futurian Society of New York. But that's another chapter; this one is about how I became a [real?] writer after all.

March 29, 1946

Dear Mr. Sturgeon:
Dear Theodore: (check one)
Dear Ted:

This is an impulse, long-delayed, but none the more carefully planned for all that. I hope you'll answer, and suspect you will, because you answered the ad...but better I should begin at the commencement, and work my way up to date.

Once upon a time I knew a character generally referred to as Horrible Henry. He knew and spoke much of a thin pale-faced lad, by name Peter Sturgeon. In the course of time, Horrible Henry being the type character who attaches himself over a course of time, he discovered a copy of *Astounding* in my house, and told me with great pride and joy that Peter's brother wrote that junk.

Didn't mean a thing, then. Not till I got back to N.Y. in the fall of '44, after a year or so bumping my baggage around the country, and read *Killdozer*, and thought with great pride, "I know a man who knows the brother of the man who wrote that."

Killdozer was a powerful convincing novelet about a duel-to-the-death between a bulldozer operator and a sentient 'dozer in a construction site on a Caribbean island. [I know how that sounds; if anyone else had written it, it *would* have been schlock.] It marked Theodore Sturgeon's return to publication after a silence of several years [during which he had been running hotels and bulldozers in the Caribbean].

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...Still didn't mean much, until shortly afterwards, when I was introduced to a Futurian, and through him to the whole world of fandom. Everybody else sat around all the time talking about authors they had known, and impressing me no end, and all I had to hang on to was that I knew a guy who knew — etc.

Then there were more stories of yours, and one day I timidly suggested I'd like to meet this guy Sturgeon. "Him!" chorused the FSNY, "He's one of Campbell's group!"

"Campbell's group" were the established authors, regular contributors to the leading magazine in the field, *Astounding Science Fiction*, edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. Obviously we, rebels on the fringe, brilliant, unrecognized, could not consort with Establishment.

...When I first met them all, I'd suggested brightly, very brightly, that we put an ad in the *Villager* and see couldn't we find just lots and lots of charming and intelligent fans in the Village. The idea got batted around, and somehow wound up with an ad in the *Saturday Review*, the which I was informed you had answered.

But any mistakes I might have made about getting in touch with you were swiftly corrected. You were still one of Campbell's gang, and undoubtedly dull as dishwater....

...Things developed, as things do. Among other things, they developed into the end of the war, and my husband swapping a submarine for an unheated flat. They also developed into me being home, banging at the typewriter, with my files open, and my desk covered with the usual assortment of papers, books, carbons, coffee cups, toys, and paper bags, when the Fuller Brush man came a-knocking.

He saw me, desk, coffee cups, and plunged into a startling sales approach. It appears you once offered him coffee and absinthe, and it had a terrific kick. You used to live on 10th Ave., and now live on Eighth, and you write stories, and he guesses you do have quite an

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imagination, and no, I don't know what his name is, and anyhow, nobody but Hemingway drinks absinthe, so he probably has you mixed up with someone else. Although, come to think of it, Horrible Henry, who is in all respects a Hemingway character, also drinks the stuff, so there's no telling.

Me — I am a sort of a cross between a ghostwriter and research assistant, have published two middling bad detective pulps, written some poetry nobody likes but me, and put out a few amateur publications, about which nobody has gone into ecstasy. I am considered quite bright by those who like me well, and you'd probably like Dan, my husband, better than me, if you really know about things like bulldozers, or give a damn. He is about to become an electronics engineer. And it's all his fault, anyhow, because he spent a year after we got married propagandizing me until I finally picked up a copy of *Astounding*.

Now it's your turn ...

Judy Zissman
449 W. 19 St.
New York City 11

We are always reinventing ourselves — our lives and our histories. Going through these old letters, I was first startled, then bemused to discover time and again how my memory corrects my life — not substantively, not in major ways, but almost exactly as one revises a carefully crafted piece of fiction — adding telling detail, pinpointing motivations, adjusting the view and the timeflow to enhance emotional rhythms — making it all *more believable*.

Is it only fiction writers who do this, or does everyone instinctively revise reality when it falls short of dramatic credibility?

By the time Ted wrote that introduction to *Out of Bounds*, fifteen years after our first meeting, he remembered me as having "not yet sold a word," and [honestly] believed that "nobody who had actually sold a story to a magazine" could escape my awe. He did not know when we first met that my awe was for the first *good* writer I had known, simply because

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he did not, at the time, know that he himself was a very good writer. He began to understand that just about the time I began to understand that I did indeed want to Be a Writer more than anything else in the world. [But even later, he would never know it more than half the time: one of the most curious of writerly traits is the onionlike layering of outrageous arrogance and abject humility — on arrogance, on humility, on — etc.].

March 30, '46

Dear Judy,

Thank you for your long-delayed, carefully planned impulse. What a wonderful blend of the studied and the spontaneous!...

Your beginning at commencement calls up a wealth of anecdotal material. Wonder what ever happened to Horrible Henry Thomas? I mind me one evening going into Martin's 57th St. Cafeteria to be descended upon by nine of the habitués, all of whom were equipped with handshakes, back-slaps, kudos and salaams. When the noise died down and the crockery had been swept up, I elicited the info that Henry Thomas had just been there and had announced, "You know, I'm not going to go see Ted Sturgeon any more. Somehow or other he makes me feel unwelcome." If you knew Horrible Henry at all, you would realize the earth-shaking nature of that statement....

The pale-faced Peter Sturgeon was elected into the Army and became a paratrooper. He married a swell kid from Brooklyn and then went overseas. After a worrisome time he returned last November.

Was much amused and interested — as was Stanton — at your remarks in re Futurians, and the *SatRev* ad. Wollheim answered us, you know. Hm. Seems we couldn't make the grade with these exalted people. Dull as dishwater. Those characters ought to see....

***

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There followed half a page of outrageous name-dropping. In fact when I met them later, the people he mentioned were almost as funny and interesting as he claimed — but you had to be there, eh?

He enclosed a cordial note of invitation from Jay Stanton, whose apartment he was then sharing.

...About Stanton. He is not a regular author of stf. He has lived most of that stuff — sideways thru time, the odd-numbered dimensions up to and including eight, and so forth. He was born on a satellite of Saturn twelve thousand years ago, and, being a little advanced for his generation (they live twenty-odd thousand years generally, and their culture is older than that of Mars, which has died out), was sent to Earth to investigate our particular re-enactment of The Beginning of Things. He has donned human guise and does pretty well — you'd hardly guess that he wasn't a terrestrian. Of course, his playing of the banjo is superhuman, and his basic philosophies are too simple for most diffuse humans to grasp. He is very good about his electronics, pacing the knowledge he doles out to the top pace of humanity, since he feels that we already have too much on Earth that we can't handle. He damn near let that anti-grav thing slip the other day — that was close. Lunch with Campbell, y'know. You have to be careful. Dull as dishwater indeed.

Then, of course, there's Ree, the dark(eyed) angel, who writes exquisite (accent on the first syllable please) poetry. I could, by several hundred thousand words, say more about Ree. But you'll see for yourself, I'm sure.... I want very much to meet you and your spouse, and, extravertially speaking, I want you all to meet us.

Thank the powers I've found some reason to thank that Fuller Brush man. Of all the uninspiring, pity-generating, troglodytic accidents of human generations, he is exceeded in objective misery only by Henry Thomas.

Ted Sturgeon

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What I had not told Ted in my letter was that I had actually *bought* his address from that Fuller Brush man. I had exactly sixty-nine cents in the world that day, and I told him so before he came in. After he told me Sturgeon lived only two blocks away I bought the cheapest thing he had — a toothbrush for 37 cents — and he gave me the address.

We went over to the 8th Ave. apartment. I didn't like Ree. Ted didn't like Dan. Jay was fun. Ted and I didn't quite *dislike* each other, but I found him surfacey, over-mannered, almost affected. He made too many jokes, far too many puns. His blond good looks were too close to pretty. I had to keep reminding myself about the strength of his stories. I think he found me crude, too bold, certainly [rumors came back to me later] "unfeminine."

Ree left.

Dan left.

[Well, that's too flip. We'd been married seven years and we had a bright blue-eyed beautiful three-year-old daughter; we had once been true and loyal comrades and now we were mutually embarrassed strangers — but that too is another chapter]

I fell — rebounded — into love with a man named Henry [not at all Horrible]. Henry and Ted liked each other, so I saw more of Ted.

Henry left.

In January, I moved from my now doubly-desolate tenement apartment into an elegant East Side place loaned to me for three months by my Aunt Tim. Ted came to visit and we found ourselves really *talking* for the first time. He was going off to a friend's country house to do some intensive writing. He left me an address.

The next morning I began the first letter of the rest of our lives. The full correspondence file covers forty years. In its most intense period, between January and May of 1947, it deals very specifically with the birth of a writer named Judith Merril.

Dear Ted:

I had no notion of writing you so soon, but I have a story to tell, brought back to mind, after almost a year's passage, by the discussion we had yesterday. I want to get it down on paper before I quite

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forget it, and I'd rather not use it anywhere in any way that might cause me to submit it for publication, or even to publish it in *Vanguard*. It must be in context if it's to be in print; and context in this case would be little short of a novel.

We were both members of the Vanguard Amateur Press Association, in which I published an occasional "personalzine" called *Temper!*

The topic that had opened the floodgates was a newly announced government initiative against anti-semitism. My anecdote concerned the inverse: Jewish community attitudes toward the "goyim." After three closely-typed single-spaced pages, I wound up:

...There is a consistent effort being made by governmental authorities to stop prejudice. But before you can cure the Christian of his contempt, you have to cure the Jew of his fear; that is the harder job. In the meantime, the very imposition of authority on the weaker side, when it has till now always favored the stronger, is going to create such a wave of reaction that things are bound for a while to be worse instead of better.

This is admittedly self-conscious...but how am I to bring up my child?

I enclose, as an afterthought, the clipping I mentioned. You'll be sure to return it, won't you? It has a good deal of meaning to me, largely because it's such an unrealizable dream. We can't start all over again, because there just isn't room in Palestine, and because our roots are elsewhere. We've got to achieve full citizenship here, somehow, or go without it. But don't miss the last two paragraphs, nor their connotation. A "new order" of some sort is what we instinctively look for; it is much of the reason why even strong individualists, like myself, become Socialists (and the number who go through exactly the phases I did is great: zionism; labor-zionism; socialism), until we realize that that dream, too, is not realizable.

Ten days later he replied:

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And now the answer. Sorry I couldn't do what I wanted to do — namely, throw up everything and write right away. I've got to do an awful lot to fully justify this period of hermitage.

How odd
Of God
To choose
The Jews

said a wit whose name I can't recall. How odd, too (speaking with the detachment of a visiting Martian), that a group of sensitive, intelligent people should strike such a dismal medium in clannishness!.... This frightening reaction would not occur if most people regarded their fellows as individuals. Further, such an attitude is the strongest possible defense against such tragic social pressures.

Merril will be persecuted because she is a Jew. You can no more stop every occasion of it than you can prevent her from catching cold. Sooner or later it will happen and only if she is fore-armed with a deep-seated, habitual regard of individuals as individuals will she be able to defend herself. Defend herself not against the little boy who says she can't come to the party because she's a Jew, but against the flux of poison within herself that will be set up. She must be able to say, with conviction, that Hans is excluding her because there is something the matter with Hans. She must be able to do this without beating Hans over the head with it: Hans is out of it, and it must be her own conviction....

Conclusion: that the member of a persecuted minority must not only be an acceptable individual in his own right as an individual. He must cast himself as an ambassador of his kind, as long as "kind" is important to the rest of society. I told that to Phil Klass recently, and he got very angry indeed at me. I could not persuade him that by ambassadorship I did not mean knuckling under, turning the cheek, and so forth.

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Phil Klass is better known as William Tenn, arguably the funniest serious writer science fiction has ever had. [Arguably: Stanislav Lem, after all?] When we met, Phil had recently published his first story, and the second, "Child's Play," was about to appear.

Phil and Ted and I were a sort of Three Musketeers for much of that magic year of '47. We laughed and argued and roamed the New York streets and picked each others' work apart, brain-trusted, cooked fine food, got drunk and argued about everything and sang and loved [each other and others] and argued some more.

One thing that now baffles me: at one of our frequent joint financial bottomings, we invented a check-kiting system that enabled us to pass a single sum of ten dollars successively through all three bank accounts for days and weeks on end. [In 1947, remember: ten bucks was *money!*] Of course banks were not yet computerized, but all our accounts were in the same branch, and I can no longer figure out just how we did it.

Feb. 13

Dear Ted:

...Your stuff about ambassadors makes me mad too. Not because it isn't true, but because it is, and I'd bet a pickled penny that's really why Phil got mad. What we resent, or I at least, is the knowledge that because I'm a Jew, I mustn't talk too loud or wear too bright colors, or show any ignorance of the social graces. I don't want to be an ambassador; I want to be *me*...

I can get by; I am, on the whole, a "white" Jew. But I don't like being among people who talk about the "yids" and I don't like being told, "You're different. They're not all like you," as I have been, too often.

The damnable part of it is that we are ambassadors, whether we choose to be or not...and you see, you contradict yourself when you say "Be a person." Within my own circle, I am free to be the best person I can be. Out in the very real would, where people insist on

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classifying and categorizing, whether you or I like it or not, I am not free to be the best person I think I can be; I must first be certain that I am not, by my behavior, shocking anyone in a way that would be regarded as particularly Jewish....

Incidentally, this does not weigh on me as heavily as these letters might make it appear. I live with certain restrictions as a Jew, certain restrictions as a woman, certain restrictions as a civilized person. I disregard these restrictions when it seems not too dangerous...so I need not think about being a Jew most of the time any more than I have to think about wearing clothes in the street....

Right now, I am all wrapped up in another argument entirely. Henry's CO friend Vitold was in town, and we spent a long winey evening talking about it. *Temper!* is full of it, an article by me, done months ago, before I knew H., or had had much chance to discuss it with anyone, and one by HES...I keep saying "it." The reference, of course, is to the entire subject of pacifist resistance to war, conscientious objection, and for that matter, any sort of resistance to war. I shan't get into it now, because it would probably run into pages and pages, and anyhow, *Temper!* will be run off tonight, and I'll send you a copy. Opinions?

"H" and "HES" are [Wonderful] Henry who was a "CO" — conscientious objector — in World War II.

Feb 22 '47

Jeer Dewdy,

...Your friend to whom you never said, defensively or otherwise "I am a Jew" was a jerk. If you must run with wide-eyed innocents who drift around blandly unconscious of the facts and facets of life, you will have to pay the consequences. (I wish I was a consequence. Those things seem to get pretty well paid.)

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I truly like the way your mind worked on that matter of ambassadors. You please me, at times, you do.... By "be a person," then, I meant that it is desirable...to live in the greatest concentration of "good taste" as is compatible with sincerity. Civilized functionalism is an overall cover of the human animal, it's true. But it isn't a hard glossy veneer. (That's affectation.) It's "oil plating" like it says in the ads — a fine even layer of clean lubricant, through which the basic steel shows well....

For God's sake get a new typewriter ribbon.

See you soon....

Ted

Feb. 24

Dear Theodore:

Sometimes I like you, too; and sometimes you irritate from here to way out there. Anyhow, I get more backhanded compliments than anybody. Women, in particular, apparently with the best of intentions, are always telling me I should do this, that, or some other damn thing, because I really "could be beautiful." Now this, is, to start with a contradiction in terms. Beautiful is something that is or is not and never could be if it isn't; the joker in this case is that experiment has made it clear to this particular might-have-been that the best I can do is look like "if I only bothered," I'd make top rating, account of when I do bother, I may look chic, but I also look plain-and-painted, and who wouldn't rather look almost-beautiful? All of which is doubtless of no interest to you whatsoever, except I'm so glad you like my mind sometimes....

Also about Jews; frankly I'm sick of them. I haven't talked or thought so much on this subject for years....

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> Naturally, it's up to the individual, of whatever background, to adjust himself to the accepted tastes of the environment he seeks out. Only we can't, if we happen to be an intellectual minority, live in the favored environment all the time. The good taste, for instance, that allows you to wear whatever clothing you like among friends of similar standards is hardly acceptable to the police force of the City of New York....

Ted was, by policy and frequent practice, a nudist. He used to point out gleefully that answering the apartment door bare was a great disincentive to solicitors [whether for votes, payments, or sales]. In high school, he had trained to be a circus acrobat, and he had a gorgeous body. We didn't live close enough for home visits when the sagging years came, so I don't know for sure whether his nudism outlasted his beauty.

> ...The intellectual tastes and emotional attitudes that led me to become a member of a left-wing group at one time are equally unacceptable to the police, as I have had occasion to learn. Now I'm coming to my point: I have spoken at I don't know how many street-meetings, after which the cop on duty informed me in one way or another, and in varied language that he would, if not for my presence, probably run the whole bunch of Jew-bastards in. But I was much too nice a girl to be dragged in with them, and would I please go home and let the officers do their duty?
>
> Of course I never did go home; the thing that made me join in the first place was a similar incident. I'd been holding out for months because the whole thing seemed so futile and so ingrown, and then I agreed to go to one meeting; after the meeting, we were singing old Joe Hill songs, and a batch of Christian Front lads, out for an evening of fun, started tossing rocks through the window. At that point, the well-known pit of the stomach got the better of the top of the brain and I decided anyone good enough for those boys to throw rocks at was good enough for me to join.
>
> This was an individual action, as were all my actions in the Party.

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I spent about 14 months as a member fighting the Party Line, and finally got out, still unconverted to the *idea* of a party line.

...What are Cajuns?

And have you had the mailing yet? *Vanguard* I mean? I'm curious about your reactions.

When are you coming back? I want to have one great big party in this beautiful place while I have it, and it might as well be when you're here as when you're not.

This was neither the first, nor by any means the last, friendship in my life that began with all-out debate; it is only the best-documented. There have been perhaps a dozen such friends I have cherished as People I Can Really Argue With: cogent thinkers with views that are thoughtfully different from mine; tough talkers who can't be easily bamboozled; friends who might conceivably convince me or be convinced, but will in any case still be friends at the end.

Of course it was not all debate. I told Ted how moved I was by his new story, "Maturity." And I sent him some of my poetry.

March 4

Dear Judy,

Sometimes you irritate me too. Like now. I'm supposed to be working. (Wait'll I fix that margin. Talking to you I got to get a little farther over to the left. Shaddup! I can temper your TEMPER with one of my own.) So instead of working I spend the time I'm not looking for your last letter in thinking about where the hell I put it. I found it stuck between one of my pastel nudes and an atlas. Now what am I doing? How the hell can I get any work done while you sit there goggling at me out of those mad eyes and wait for me to talk to you? Shaddup! Least you can do is sit quiet and listen.

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This "beautiful is a is or is a is not" deal is for the birds. You know better than that. All things are beautiful, at times, to a degree. Have you ever thought about beauty, just beauty, as a thing apart from other things, rather than as a quality, or appurtenance to other things? I wonder if you have...do you ever sit quietly long enough to do that? So much beauty is quiet stuff.... Mostly you go around like a man with a paper scrotum in a forest fire....

I'm not going to talk to you about being beautiful anymore. This infant, this newborn, puking, pink-and-mustard friendship of ours has already reached the stage where I can sense the old "there he goes again" reaction when I say anything about it, so the hell with it. Know what that reaction is? Prejudice. Yes it is. Put a stroboscopic beam on the split second reactions of any bigot and you'll see. Here comes the set of factors; I recognize them; I don't like them already.

Beautiful is a state of mind. It is a state of mind where it starts and it is a state of mind where it goes to. It is an abstract compounded of harmony and/or contrast with the environment of the beautiful thing. The environment does not have to be concrete, but it has a hell of a lot to do with the reflexes of the beholder. So be beautiful, and I shall react to beauty to the degree of yours. Be uninteresting, and I shall not react. Be downright ugly, and I'll probably think that you're beautiful, so don't ever worry about that again.

...In all this business of bad taste and good taste and so on, I'm beating my brains out against the very things you are — the desire for the right to rebel against that which does not suit my standards. It's a tough battle, particularly when you evolve to the point where you are a hypocrite if you don't face the fact that all too often you are substituting "convenience" for "standards." I can only know my own definition of graciousness, and it is one that precludes hating a man for his black skin, pissing on other people's rugs, going naked when it will distress others, sleeping with other men's wives, violating privacy, and any number of other delightful or

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uncomfortable or fun-making things. A gracious man avoids many difficulties, true. So does the professional rebel....

"...but with a whimper" is damn good. I'm going to give you a present.

The discerning reader may be surprised to hear that neither of us knew we were conducting a courtship — not till the night he came back to New York, in the first week of March.

He phoned me from a bus station in the morning, said he had a gift for me, and that he did not want to go directly to Jay's: could he come to my place first? *Of course!* I had, from somewhere, a bottle of sparkling wine; I had an old high school prom evening gown, and the makeup my aunt had given me [and shown me how to use] before she left. I went out and bought some balloons. It was a fine party, for two.

The gift was a copy of Clement Wood's *The Complete Rhyming Dictionary and Poet's Craft Book*, inscribed, "I give this so that Judy can / Become a god-damn artisan."

He advised me to practice formal verse, if only for the sake of my prose. Although we were seeing each other almost every day, we continued to write letters — often hand-delivered. In fact, he had carried his last letter with him. I answered it the next day, after he woke me with a phone call.

Thank you for calling. I feel well-slept, well-pleased, and, well — *very* well....

About the beautiful deal, as I've since explained, most of what I wrote was sheer ugly defense mechanism. After all, there's bound to be some reaction to a character who goes around telling everybody how unfeminine I am....

Beautiful, however, is what our numerous Korzybski-mad friends would call multiordinal. I was talking about beauty-parlor-beauty, not sunset-and-soul beauty, and wouldn't have said what I did about

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the second variety even in a defensive mood. I agree with you completely, and now what are you going to do?

Listen, there's something serious I want to talk about. I mean practical-serious. I told you the mercenary calculating reasons why I cultivated you, and they still hold. I like the way you've taken me up on my poetry-scribbling, but I'm much more concerned with prose cause it pays. The more of what I write you're willing to read and comment on, the happier I'll be about it....

The current admonition is just to warn you that any time you do comment, you'll have to make sure it's rounded. It's easy as hell for me to decide it's all wrong if nothing's said at the same time about its good points. This is not in reference to anything you've said or done in the past...just a request for the most useful variety of criticism in the future. And for as much criticism as you can take time to give me, too.

Hey the hell with this stuff. Happy New Year. Spring is here. I just took Merry to school and came back, and there's an ad in the paper for a five-room apartment, and I've been reading my new book on the bus, and I got some fine pictures of Merril in the mail today, one of her looking into the living room mirror with a little-girl's grin at the delights of a mirror.

Spring is here!

It feels so funny to feel happy all the way through...clean nice fresh fun young happy. Thank you, Theodore, and thank the nice man who mixed today's clear sky.

The five-room apartment was in the basement of a big old low-rise on East 4th Street near Second Avenue. [Ten and twenty years later this would be beatnik and then hippie territory; I was premature.] It was too expensive, but the rooms were big, the ceilings high, the windows large, and the third bedroom meant I could rent out a room. I took it.

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And I wrote a sonnet — or thought I did.

The world's a whirling ball of fire;
The world's a slowing mass of ice;
My world's a wistfully precise
Geometry of my desire.
My world's a passionate love-lyre
Played on a bed of lava and gneiss;
And I'm an articulate, concise
Spier and crier and versifier.

I'm an integral part of the ruse
We play on us in the same old game,
Shaping the stars to the eyes of the Muse.
At the door of my cell I bid for fame
And codify my cosmic clues
In the human hall of freezing flame.

Ted pointed out, with some restraint, that sonnets are not ordinarily in tetrameter. I revised it. Achieving greater technical perfection did not improve the poetry. Ted wrote me a five-page letter:

...It says stuff. There is little evidence of the worst fault of the sonneteer: the forced shaping and pruning of words and thoughts to fit the rigidity of the sonnet form. It is a rigidity. You are at liberty to write any form, or any kind of vers libre, that you choose. Nobody says you must write sonnets. But if you do, write a sonnet and not something approaching one....

I shall go overleaf and consider your final version line by line. Is it necessary for me to write here things about "don't take this the wrong way" and "I really think you have talent, and am only trying to help you in a field in which you would exceed me except for the accident that I got into it many years before you did"?

I trust not. Suffice it to say that this is a hell of a lot [of] trouble....

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If you had no talent in these matters, I know I could say as much, and do it freely. I'd even gain from it. You'd respect me personally for it. So draw your own conclusions.

There followed a detailed, painstaking analytic dissection of each line — sometimes a sentence, sometimes a paragraph. Then:

Now, you wrote a sonnet. You did it as a challenge, and as the taking up of a challenge. Your next sonnet will be better if you follow these suggestions:

Keep pure and faithful your respect for the form. Violate it nowhere, ever, not in the slightest shift of syllabic value. Our language, with all its faults, is one of the most completely expressive in history.

I find little fault with your punctuation, but it might help you to assume my view of it; namely, that punctuation is inflection in print. To me, "She loves me — " is heard differently from "She loves me..." and from "She loves me." There is a speaking difference between a colon and a semicolon and a comma. With this quite clear in your mind, punctuate the sonnet as if it were prose; for, as far as idea-content is concerned, it is prose, just as fine prose is poetry....

Now, about the "rules." They can be violated, and are, by the great. You can cite me hundreds of examples. There are tetrametric lines in Shakespeare. If you would do this, go ahead. But be Shakespeare first.

T.H.S.

P.S. Your title piles plethora on pleonasm, Peleon upon Ossa. "A SONNET IN IAMBIC PENTAMETER" is A FLUID IN LIQUID FORM.

I was incredulously grateful for both the faint praise and the detailed criticism. I had by this time sold three or four more stories — detective and

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westerns — to Doc Lowndes, and Ted began pushing at me to try science fiction. The writing, and rewriting, of the sonnet, and Ted's reactions, had quite confirmed my confidence that I could learn any literary technique — but good science fiction was not just a matter of learned skills. I *knew* I did not have the capacity for the imagination-cum-detailed-visualization it required.

It never occurred to me that the same quality might be a prerequisite for poetry: I took refuge in Clement Wood. [I never did write another sonnet, but I did do one each of some other tricky forms.]

While I practiced precise meter and scansion and rhyme, I was cleaning and caring for my aunt's elegant apartment as I had [and still have] never done in any place of my own. I was still doing some of the research-and-ghostwriting jobs, and writing the odd filler piece for Doc Lowndes. I was taking Merry to nursery school every morning, picking her up in the afternoons, putting bandaids on her knees, playing with her, reading to her, making dinner and giving her a bath every evening, and I was getting ready to move on April first. [Henry had told me once that the way to deal with painters and plumbers was to smoke unfiltered Camels and offer them during discussions. As usual, he was right. The painters mixed me the exact shade of gray-blue turquoise I had fallen in love with on the walls of Tim's apartment.]

I found tenants for my new spare bedroom: Friedel and Asher, immigrants from Latvia.

Meanwhile, Ted and I were *all* the pleasures proving, orbiting at e2, the limiting speed of emotion; and I was deciding, *Yes!* I was going to be a professional writer. Between times, I coped with my mother, who was delighted, but worried, about the last item, and worried-and-upset about all the rest of the above.

I was twenty-four years old. Now, forty-five more years down the line and a practiced teller of tales, I know that if I were inventing this story, I would never try to convince a reader that so much could have been packed into so short a time. I did not believe it myself; my revisionist memory had stretched six weeks into six months — but it's all there in the letters.

How can time be so compressed? Where did the energy come from? *When did this young woman sleep*?

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Just nine days after I opened the door for Ted in my old prom dress I wrote:

Monday morn, before 3

Ted dear,

I left the phone, and stumbled over to the typer, full of unfinished scraps of conversation, thinking how, since I'd been awakened early, I could spare time to write you and explain something important.

Imagination...I didn't realize, I think, until tonight, quite fully that it was something that could be developed and wasn't just an "is an is or is an is not" deal. (I love that!) I don't know what factors you had in mind when you said my imagination had been stifled, but I think I can follow it pretty easily. Start with the kind of reaction I had to music when I was a kid — someone would laugh at me, so I'd go away from whatever was beautiful, and forget about it. Toss in an intensely socially conscious environment during my adolescence, where the searching out of the Facts became the ultimate desideratum. Add a husband who called poetry "poultry," which would have been all right if he had ever called it anything else, even when he wrote it. Run through this a thread of enforced independence, personal, and then financial, which kept the sheltering roof anywhere but overhead, and let the sunlight in a little too bright a little too often, so that many things were seen in sharp relief that might have benefited by shades and tone. Combine it with a sharply analytical mind, which I have. My dreams went underground.

So now Sturgeon comes along and tells me sure I've got an imagination, all I have to do is relax and I'll find out.

I started in this game wanting to be an editor, because I was pretty damn sure I'd never make the grade as a writer. I began to understand applied technique from Johnny Michel, who lives by it.

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Johnny's a guy who's been disappointed by life so damned often he's taken the delicate quivering little centerpiece and carefully callous-camouflaged it, till hardly anybody, including Johnny, knows it's there. He could, and did, teach me what I had known when I was ten, but since forgotten, that writing was something you did by figuring people out, and working hard at the images in your mind, and expressing them in certain symbols, with meaningful allusions and touches as often as direct statements. The only thing he couldn't teach me was where the images came from and how to let the pictures come out without having to *figure* them out.

Anyhow, after a while along came beautiful lovely deep-purple Henry. (I told you I only learn from other people; books help, but I can't get it without people.) Of course he had this business all confused with romance, which made it hard for me to get at sometimes, because the romantic smoke-screen is something I bypassed a long time ago, and haven't much use for. Romance, fun-and-gayety, yes; romance, slick-style love, no. I told Henry things I'd almost forgotten about, like the long involved games I used to play in the attic "observatory" with my one close friend. I was generally a modified version, or an exaggerated one, of Richard the Lion-Hearted, mixed up with Robin Hood, Kim, and a few early Greek gods, and she the lovely, but independent and troublesome princess, and we spun it out, near as I can recall, week by week, and sometimes day by day, for four years or so, and when I moved back to NY it was probably the thing I missed most. I should have been writing it, not playing it, but my mother plagued me so to write, and kept talking about what my father had done...and there was always the excellent chance I'd do less well than he.

Anyhow, there wasn't much outlet after that. I did write a little, though unwillingly, when I was fourteen and fifteen. By then I had friends, two budding chemists and one ditto economist, and I thought I was a young economist myself, so I started college and quit after a year in a passion of disgust with the school and myself and the world. It was the summer of 1940, the draft act, and war

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coming, depression still, and I was the Forgotten Generation, almost all by myself.

The five years between us make a difference here. I was seventeen that summer; war was something direct and personal and too hurtful to do anything about but be logical. If you let yourself feel it, at seventeen, it damn near killed you. I met Danny and got married, fast, and discovered sex, and found out how many things sex can make unnecessary. Sex and a Cause, together, can take care of all the tag ends of emotion and imagination.

You know most of the rest of the story. I was a Party worker for a year and a half, a housewife for two years, and then I was suddenly alone, with a baby, allotment checks, time to experiment, and eventually John Michel, and all the people and trains of thought he brought with him. I couldn't let myself go all the way, and make full use of his (and their) limited value, because there was Dan, in the background, Dan whom I loved like crazy, and who would be back, probably still laughing at all that sort of thing, Dan who was pleased as punch at my first published story, and loved having a writer-wife to brag about, but wasn't likely to go for anything much purpler than *Crack Detective.* I very consciously did not want to unfit myself for living with him. It happened anyway, but I tried goddam hard not to let it happen.

All right, here I am. I'm full of lovely little words that bust up near the top and run away again, because they're not used to coming out. I still feel a little embarrassed when I talk about the effect good writing has on me, because whenever I said anything to Dan about it, it didn't seem quite to make sense. His view was, 'tain't how it's said that counts, it's *what.* I never accepted that, but I couldn't fight it, because the attack was on something too intimately part of me to be allowed to set itself up in opposition to my love, so I shut it up and turned away from it. It wasn't his fault, because he didn't know; I just subsided into the understanding-without-words of the sensitive inarticulates.

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Now I tell you I want, more than anything else in the world, to be a good writer. I do. I want the power of it, the kind of power you described in a bulldozer, the kind that comes from looking at what you wrote in a second-hand store, and knowing it has become a part of at least one person who read it, and that if it was good — if you had something to say and got it across — well, whatever it was, it's part of somebody else now, and you better goddam well *hope* it was good. I want to be sitting up there pushing words around the way the guy on the dozer pushed the levers, and getting results the same way. You can't insult me or hurt my feelings about it, not if you start from the basic premise that I can learn it, that I've got all the levers and the necessary weight and strength and the machine waiting to be used, and all I have to do is learn its workings. Hell, Ted, just accepting that premise is as big a compliment as anyone can pay me right now.

Now tonight, on the telephone, you tell me I've got imagination after all, and for the first time I realize what happened to it, where it went, and how to get it back, and you ask if I'm insulted!

I'm goddam mad at the people who stifled it; I'm goddam happy and pleased and grateful and full of love for the guy who's willing to let me practice its somewhat dulled workings on him himself, personally, even though it means asking questions and getting inadequate answers a lot of the time.

Thanks, Ted.

with love and gratitude,

Judy

Ted got a wire from the British magazine, *Argosy*: his story, "Bianca's Hands," had won their annual contest. A thousand dollars, but more than that: a mainstream literary award. I watched him, that afternoon, just beginning to allow himself to be aware that he was, by anyone's

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standards, a *good* writer, and I began to understand as well the true nature — beyond money or even glory — of the satisfactions a good writer [a Real Writer] might experience. I went home and tried to write what I'd seen and felt.

> This was the taste of victory. He slid it in and out of his mouth, examining it for a moment apart from himself, tasting it then as a thing of himself. This was the flavor of triumph, this music, this message, these words, words of himself that had brought forth words of another, life and pain of himself that had come clean and beautiful onto paper, the essence of his own person translated by the message in his hand, by the private meaning of the music he had chosen to hear, into praise and dollars. This was the thing that had happened to him, the memory with which he lived. And a telegram and a thousand dollars changed it, purged it, made it only a memory, no more a part of himself, now only a thing that had come from himself, that would belong to a hundred, a thousand, and tens of thousands of other human beings.
>
> This was the taste of triumph, this once-intimate, once-personal savor that had gone out of him onto the paper, out of the paper into the check, that set him free from pain without losing the knowledge of pain, free from love without losing the glory of love, free from being human without losing the humanity.

Two days later we were in an ice-cream parlor with Merry, and Ted announced he had the perfect pen-name for me. I had already decided I did not want to do serious writing under either my husband's or my father's name. I had, in fact, two pen-names already, men's names required for Doc's pulps: Ernest Hamilton combined Henry's and Ted's middle names; Eric Thorstein was in homage to Thorstein Veblen. But this new name had to be just *me*.

Ted printed out on a napkin in elaborate characters: JUDITH MERRIL. I loved it and Merril thought it was great, but I said I couldn't use it: it sounded anglo-saxon; I wasn't going to try to *pass*.

Ted got pissed off. For two days I actually didn't see him. Then he

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arrived on my threshold and handed me an envelope, with a letter and another envelope inside.

March 18 5am

Judy darlin':

Enclosed is a thing. Now I'll tell you all about it. But first — please! If you can curb your curiosity, just this once, please don't read the enclosure until you are by yourself and will not be interrupted. I'd like to think of your reading it under those circumstances.

I got the idea for it when I doped out the pen-name for you in that ice-cream parlor the other day. The thing you did that I said was bad was to thumbs-down the Merril spelling, trying to work out a Merol or Meloroll or Merylstein or Cmerilskowski or something. I saw it as Judith Merril; it looks well, it says well, and I can't see it as anything else.

Your reasons for wanting it like that annoy me. You are a far less self-conscious Jew than Phil Klass, yet he means to make his reputation and get his skill as William Tenn and Kenneth Putnam before he uses that patronym. Phil won't eat butter with his meat for anyone at any time, and here you won't publish under an aryan handle. Is everyone crazy?

The thing that happened that made it all right for me to go ahead was remembering something you said about your Hebrew name. I went to my trusty old encyclopedia and looked it up. It was right in there. It means Jewess. It doesn't mean anything else but Jewess.

Or would you like better I should circumcise you?

As for the pome (this is the Poet's Craft-book Dep't.), it is a Petrarchan sonnet, which means that its form is extremely rigid and complex. The rhyme-scheme is 1 2 2 1, 1 2 2 1, 3 4 5, 3 4 5. Notice

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that there is no rhymed couplet at the end, as is found in Shakespearean and Wordsworthian sonnets. The idea is presented in the octet (the first eight lines) and resolved in the sestet. I'd rather build something like this than eat, which is demonstrable....

The rest of what I have to tell you I have told you before and will tell you again and again and again and again and....

T.H. Sturgeon

And in the second envelope:

The Birth of Judith Merril

As if your life were in itself a god
And pondered on its past, and on the pain
And pleasure that composed it; all the grain
And polish of its growing; how it trod
The ways of trouble and the flowered sod
Of laughter...So created, it again
Created, Jove-like, from its careful brain —
A child was born mature, armed, clothed and shod.

This miracle-Minerva is as wise
As all the wisdom you have shown. Her strength
Is yours, and all your gentleness and heart.
Creative, like her forebears, she shall rise —
She will be heard! and all mankind, at length,
Shall know her for her worth, her truth, her art.

Yes, he was [briefly] besotted. And yes, I knew it. What was my worth, my truth, my art? Two pulp detective stories, three pulp westerns and a handful of half-good poems!

But I was — and am — overwhelmed by the knowledge that behind the infatuation was a kind of love — love of writing as much as of me — that could make him give his time, his energy, his knowledge and inventiveness, not

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to make me his disciple — I was already that — but to help me to become my own self, a writer-woman who just *might*, with enough work and inventiveness of my own, become a colleague. And this extraordinary effort never faltered, even after he fell in love with another woman!

Of course I was blissfully besotted myself, but on a slightly different potion. When he came back the next day, I swooningly acknowledged my new name, never once challenging his specious arguments. But when he began talking about marriage, I stopped swooning.

Maybe there was some worth and truth, even wisdom, after all [if as yet no evidence of art]. Where did I get the sense or the strength to back off [just a bit]? Consider not just the honor, the glamor and the flattery, but the fun and excitement. I knew I wasn't ready yet [if ever] for another marriage, and I suspected Ted was a better lover than my husband, but what saved me — saved us — I think, is that I was still partly in love with Henry.

Only partly: not so much that I ever lost sight of what I was getting.

march 20

lissen, lug —

you just called and woke me out of a sound sleep and some fantastic dreams. my imagination's improving. you know i never used to dream? mostly i just want to thank you for last night. for the stars and the crisp air and the way the air whirled and the stars jumped up and down and hugged themselves. also i thank you for the sea surf and the palm trees and the crescent moon lying on its back. these things do not endure for me in the way that the concentrated essence of people does. i'm a people-lover...new york is so full of so many people's loves and hates and daily livings. there is a short whitman poem, which i do not seem able to locate at the moment, that says he loves manhattan not for its shops or streets or anything, except the way his eyes meet the eyes of lovers and friends as he walks through the city. that's it....

i left you quite disturbed, not unhappy, and not disturbed for me,

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but full of beautiful tears because i wanted very badly to be able to give as much as i was getting...oh well, why hash it? thank you for last night and just for being in my life.

How *can* time be so compressed? Reading through these letters, I was astonished to find that the affair I remembered as lasting about six months was in fact only six weeks long. Wellllll — seven? Eight? There was this ambiguous lap-over period between me and my successor — but part of the reason for the ambiguity was that in that same dreamtime I was, in fact, at last, Becoming a Real Writer.

For years I have been telling the story of how I wrote my first science fiction story — the first *Judith Merril* story — and telling it wrong.

Once there was a little green man who was not running up the wall. The wall was on the landing outside the Stanton apartment. Ted — who had never stopped badgering me about writing an sf story — was standing there with me.

"Look!" he said. "Look! See the little green man running up the wall?"

I looked. "No," I said, "I don't see any little green man."

"Look," he said again. "See? He's taking quick little steps and he has a long pointy hat and it's sticking straight out — "

"Ted," I said, "I don't see any little green man, and if I did, he'd be taking long slow draggy steps, and his hat would be drooping down."

Ted used the smile that sometimes made him look like a sardonically sweet demon. "Right!" he said happily, "I write fantasy. You write science fiction."

Now this actually happened as told — I think. [I forget names, faces, places, times; I do usually remember dialogue, precisely and with intonation.] But for years I have believed, and reported, that I went home after that and started work early the next morning on "That Only a Mother" — the story that made my new name famous in the little pond of science fiction almost overnight.

Not true.

I made reference to the Little Green Man in a letter to Ted on March

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20. The story was written a month later, while my daughter was having the measles and Ted was dallying with Mary Mair.

April 15

Dear Ted:

This is no doubt feminine, irrational, and unfair; but I've got to get it off my chest, and if I do it this way you won't get it till tomorrow, by which time it will be a little fairer, if still true.

You started writing a story Saturday. You were hot; you were going to stay right with it till it was done, and not let anything or anybody interfere. Even me. OK? I was right with you, and still would be, if same held true. But you let George Smith interfere; you let Phil Klass interfere; you let a vaccination interfere, and the Argosy girl. They're all either "unavoidable" or "justifiable," I know. But today is Tuesday, and I'm beginning to feel I might be either unavoidable or justifiable myself.

I'm sorry; I know I'm being unreasonable. I am feeling mildly sorry for myself, and that is a dreadful thing to do. But knowing, as you do, what it's like to be cooped up with a sick-but-not-deathly-sick kid (and going slowly crazy at the same time because there's work I've got to get done, and can't) — "Judeee," it yells from the other room right now, "you were going to fix my racing car — "

....

The spring was busted. And I don't like the tone of voice I used to her. I would give my left ear to be free to stay at this machine steadily for a while, maybe eight whole hours without an interruption. So I take it out on you because you don't come to see me.

No, there isn't a god damn thing you could do if you did come over. I'm sorry, Ted; this is one bitch of a letter. I just hope you've finished

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the story by the time you get it, because I don't think I could forgive myself if it did make you interrupt your work.

Ted wrote to me the same day, telling me about Mary.

Intuition? ESP? Call it what you like; we're talking about the times you know stuff you don't *know* you know. It happens to some of us more than others; it happens to everyone who doesn't simply shut it out.

A few days earlier, when I could still leave Merril with a sitter because I thought all she had was a cold, I had gone over to the 8th Avenue apartment, and met Mary for the first time. There were several visitors that day, among them an extraordinarily beautiful woman, very quiet, very pleasant. I did not sense anything between her and Ted; at that point there was nothing — she had just arrived.

Next day or the one after, Ted stopped by, and something very important happened. Merril still had a "cold": she was being kept indoors, but not in bed. Ted — unlike me — was fastidious, possibly to a fault. After an hour or so he said, agonized, "*Will* you wipe that child's nose?" I looked, surprised, and saw a worm of mucous running down to her mouth; recalled vaguely that it might have been there for quite some time; wiped. Of course it was back ten minutes later. After Ted left, I stopped seeing it again.

The same day, there was a tiny article in the *NY Herald Tribune* — page 52 or thereabouts. The US Army of Occupation in Japan was denying rumors that many infanticides were occurring in the areas around Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Migod!* I thought, remembering the pictures I'd seen in *Science Illustrated*: brain tumors and missing limbs on baby rats whose parents had been exposed to atomic radiations.

Those were the seeds from which the story — The Story — grew. While they gestated, Merril's cold became, officially, measles. I couldn't go out: she had to be kept quiet and resting in a darkened room.

Whenever she was sleeping, or temporarily undemanding, I worked on a western story for Lowndes. Ted was supposedly holed up with a story of his own. On the 15th, he wrote to tell me Mary was still there, and he had made love to her. He was big on monogamy in those days, and could hardly believe he now wanted both of us. He was, actually, in torment.

So was I, but I didn't know it yet. My Story was getting ready to be

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written. It was about a mother who didn't — wouldn't? couldn't? — *see* her baby's missing limbs. All my passion, all my sensoria, were bound up in the feelings, the awareness, of that other mother; with what was left over, I wrote Ted a reply that was affectionate, analytical, and quite astonishingly objective.

...The best we had to hope for was that, if it went on long enough, and was convincingly good, it might become, "for the rest of our lives." It wasn't made of forever-stuff. I could have played with you and pretended and kept you with me till I didn't need you. It says here. I could do that with some people, I think. I can't, and couldn't, do it with you. No more than you could do it with me, now, when you could have avoided stepping on my ego-toes at a bad moment by playing with me....

I don't think you will be hurt, or misunderstand, when I say that it wasn't losing you that made me cry. I don't think I've lost you; I never had all of you, and I think I still have most of what I did.

...I barely know Mary, but I've often found I do better analytically when I don't know people too well. She's good for your ego. She'll probably be good for a lot of other things. But you won't be content to have her bring the coffee. You'll want her to talk, too. You'll want her to talk *and* bring the coffee. She'll either learn to mimic the talk, or else she'll really learn to be part of it, and then she'll stop bringing coffee. You'll give her everything she needs from a man, and she won't be able to give you everything you need. You'll come to me for some things, or someone like me. And because she's not stupid, not "just-woman" enough to sit back and say, "That's my man; he can do no wrong," she'll resent not being able to give you everything.

You've got marriage and love and comfort and companionship all mixed up in your mind. But if you want a woman devoted to you, with all the most powerful and endearing connotations of that word, then stick to the beautiful-but-dumb classification, Mary's

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not dumb enough. She's got too much brains and sensitivity to be happy as a doormat, and, I'm afraid, not quite enough to be the other kind of thing.

Watch your step, darling....

If you're not in love with Mary, don't tell her you are. It will hurt less, at least, if she knows what to expect. If you are in love with her, the sort of way that makes a man stop noticing other women's shapes, then do tell me. I don't want to knock myself out against a stone wall of refusals, but just now, if you're still available, I'd rather have you than anyone else who is.

Four days later, I actually sat down to write the story, and it came in a rush, the fastest story I have ever written: eight hours straight, with times out for calls from the other bedroom. When I finished, I decided I could leave Merry with Friedel for an hour. I knew it was a good story: I thought it was *right* — but how could I tell until Ted saw it? [I don't think it even crossed my mind that I might run into Mary.]

Ted read the story, glowed, made some small suggestions to tighten up the ending, and said to send it to his agent, Scott Meredith. It should not, he said, go to the science fiction magazines until it had been tried on the big slicks. He would phone Meredith about it. I floated home over the rooftops.

That was Monday. Wednesday he wrote me the definitive Dear Judy letter. Of course I had known it was coming; that didn't make it hurt any less. Friday evening he came over and we had the Inevitable Horrid Rehash. I cried a lot. We made love one last time [we thought]. After he left, I wrote a piece of very tricky verse.

Another last sweet childhood treasure died
This night; and love became a dream that once
Had lived. I don this mirthless night the dunce
Cap of sophisticated fun to hide
The child who cries inside while I deride
The logic of her tears. I let her live.

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This cap's protection I shall gladly give
To keep the child's fierce passionate wide-eyed
Protest alive within the calm outside
Adult who came to growth this tired night,
When scalpel words dissected, in the light
Of a new love, the moon for which I cried.

And the next day I wrote a letter apologizing for tears, explaining my miseries away — and exulting!

(Sat afternoon)

...Monday I sat down and wrote that baby, saw you Monday afternoon, came home, went to sleep early, got up at three, and rewrote. I knew I'd done something. I had to see how other people took it. I put it in the box for Meredith, and came home to wait.

This is my first story, really. I've watched people read, and they start slow with a chuckle here and there. They read quickly thru the midsection. Then they get to the last scene, and they read slower and slower, turning the pages as fast as they can. If you make a noise they say "hmmmm?" but they don't look up. And I haven't heard from Meredith.

I can do it, Ted, by God, by God, I can do it! Have you the remotest idea what it is to find that out after the years I've been convinced I couldn't? I can sit up there on the dozer and MAKE IT GO.

If I can't sell it now, if I have to do something else for a living, it's gonna break my li'l heart. I'm in a state of excitement like nothing I've known I think since I met Dan when I was 17. And no one to let it out on at all! When the depression hit, valid or not, it hit hard.

I can see how it looked from your end and I'm terribly sorry it had to come when it did. Try and see how it was from here....

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Please call on me if there's anything at all I can do.

Love,

J.

I wonder what sort of "anything" it was I thought I might do?

"Everything" might have expressed my state of mind better, but my conceit of being in command of the dozer was considerably premature. I know now "That Only a Mother" was not in fact a skillfully written story: I knew it as short a time as a year later. It was — still is, perhaps — a *powerful* story: a combination of raw enotion, overweening conviction, and nine years — from age fifteen — of suppressing the nascent Real Writer.

In the next weeks, I wrote some more stuff for Lowndes and some love stories aimed at the women's slicks. Of all the stuff I've written, one time and another, straight love stories [including my single try at a confession-magazine story] are the only things I have been completely unable to sell.

I learned that Mary had a voice even more angelic than her face. I arranged for her to sing at Merril's nursery school; it was a great success. Ted was a singer too; in those days he played a great twelve-string guitar. [I am a tri-tone: not mono-, mind you; I have three notes — with no sense of pitch and no memory for melody.] Obviously, they were made for each other [for a while at least; I think it actually lasted two years].

I found another lover, and wrote some forty pages of unsent letters, learning the ways to think of Ted and Mary as a couple, without having to lose Ted's friendship and criticism. Scott Meredith took me on as a client, and began circulating "That Only a Mother" to the first-rank magazines, all of which bounced it vigorously. The first and best rejection letter was from *Colliers*.

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Collier's
THE NATIONAL WEEKLY
THE CROWELL-COLLIER PUBLISHING COMPANY
250 Park Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

May 19, 1947

Maybe we can find a thicker-skinned editor. And the encouraging parts are encouraging. SM

Scott Meredith
1650 Broadway
New York City

Dear Mr. Meredith:

Here is THAT ONLY A MOTHER, by Judith Merrill, which I cannot return fast enough for my own satisfaction. I think that other readers of Collier's will feel the same revulsion toward this plot that I do.

The writing in the story is effective as is the characterization. We simply think that the author has made a poor choice of subject matter. Maybe it's possible, this situation could come up. But unless the author convinces her readers of a general background of war and general horribleness in the world, she will not succeed with the story. In this version she takes too much for granted as far as war is concerned--and even if she did draw it in, I still doubt the acceptability of the story.

Nevertheless, we'd like very much to see more of this author's work, if we could.

Sincerely,

Jean Stone,
Fiction Department

enc.

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Ted Sturgeon's "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast" appeared in volume 1, number 1 of this magazine fifty years ago. His story "Blue Butter" appeared in our Twenty-fifth Anniversary issue. Mr. Sturgeon himself didn't stick around to see us hit the big five-oh, but it's sure nice to have something new from him.

Paul Williams and Noel Sturgeon discovered this story in the course of assembling Sturgeon's complete stories. (The sixth volume of the collection, entitled Baby Is Three, *is due out shortly.) This vignette dates from 1955 or thereabouts, when TS lived in Congers, New York, and the context of it should be self-evident. While it's not a masterpiece to rival Mr. Sturgeon's greatest works, "NY Vignette" is a lovely little examination of that realm between reality and fantasy, a realm his brilliance often illuminated.*

New York Vignette

By Theodore Sturgeon

JOHN: WE WANTED TO TELL you a story this morning...a New York story but something special...something different, and so we asked a special, different sort of writer to send us one. His name is Theodore Sturgeon...and he's the winner of the International Fantasy Award for the best science fiction novel of 1954 — a beautiful and enchanted novel called...*More Than Human*. In just a few days, you'll be able to see Ted's award, a gleaming chromium spaceship, in the window of Brentano's Fifth Avenue shop.

We're really not altogether certain whether Ted's written us a story or not...but I'll read you his letter.

It begins — Dear *Pulse:*

MUSIC: OPENING CURTAIN...NICE, NORMAL...BRIGHT. UNDER FOR:

JOHN: When I got your note, I was delighted at the idea of doing a story

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for you. I went straight to the typewriter, unwound the typewriter ribbon from the neck and ears of my baby daughter, Tandy, sat down on my son Robin's plastic automobile, got up again, picked the pieces of plastic out of myself and the chair, dried Robin's tears, handed Tandy to her mother for a bath, rewound the ribbon, put some paper in the machine, and nothing happened.

You see, what you did is ask for a story at one of those times when a writer can't write and nothing can make him write. I tried, honestly I did. I played all the tricks on myself I ever learned. I drank two cups of strong, black coffee, I did some knee-bends, I filed my nails, read the morning paper all the way through, ate a stale bagel and a handful of raisins, sniffed at a bottle of aromatic spirits of ammonia to clear my head, and lit my pipe. I don't like a pipe but it makes me feel like an author. I even had a small quarrel with my wife, which sometimes works wonders. Still no story.

There was nothing for it but to go out and wander. They say New York has something for everyone — you just have to know where to look. I went looking first on Rockefeller Plaza, which never fails to do something to me. I hung over the rail and watched the skaters moving like moths and mayflies to music that came from nowhere, everywhere...anyone who can pass them by without a glance has lost his sense of wonder, and I'm sorry for him. I looked for sunlight high on the clean, clever buildings reaching into the morning and found it. I listened to the whisper of blades on ice, tires on asphalt, of a hundred thousand heels on paving, all blended like a great breathing. But it was only magic, its own special kind of magic; it didn't give me a story idea for you.

So I left and walked west past the place where Dave Garroway holds forth in the early, early hours, toward the Avenue of the Americas, where stores and theaters were beginning to wake, where men can make keys for you and you can buy crêpes suzettes and cameras and luggage and lingerie; and I slowly became aware of a neat pair of shoulders and a smooth neat hat. I must have been following the man for minutes without quite realizing it. The coat was one of those banker's specials — you know, flat and formal and with a smooth narrow collar that might be velvet and might be fur.

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And the hat was what some people call a bowler and some a derby. Hat and collar were not black, but of the darkest possible brown, and the whole aspect was — well, *neat*. He was strolling along, turning his head a little from time to time, and though I couldn't see his face I somehow knew he was smiling at storefronts, automobiles, marquees, people — smiling at the whole, wide world. I wondered what he was smiling about. I wondered, too, what kind of a smile it might be. Was he smiling *at*? Or smiling *with*?

The first corner we came to was the one where the Radio City Music Hall squats like a kneeling elephant with its big friendly mouth open, and in the entrance stood two girls.

One of them reminded me of mint leaves and the other was as real and pretty as a field of daisies. I saw the man in the brown bowler hat walk up to them and he bowed from the waist, that stiff, slight, quaint little gesture that can only be done by a certain sort of person, because it makes the rest of us look silly. He raised the hard, neat hat a trifle and by the tilt of his head and the pleasure just beginning on the girls' faces, I knew he was smiling a special smile. From his pocket he drew something and handed it to one of the girls, the field-of-daisies one, and without pausing, with never a break in his leisurely stride, he went on.

Then it was my turn to pass the girls. They stared after the man and their mouths were round as a thumb print. Then one of them looked down in her hand and "Lark!" she said, "Oh, Lark, look: he gave us tickets for *Jupiter's Darling!* How did he know I wanted to see it so much?" They stared after him spellbound as I passed, and happy as Christmas. I followed the man across the avenue, thinking, "Lark, Lark. Now what a nice name for a girl that is!" and watching him. A few doors up from the corner is a hardware store, and the hardware man had set a tall ladder against the building. He was up there looking at a place where his awning had slipped off its little hooks where I suppose the wind had bent them. And before I knew what was happening, my man in the brown bowler had skipped up two rungs of the ladder. He stood there balanced easily, and with one hand he tipped his hat and with the other he took from his pocket a pair of pliers and handed them up to the hardware fellow. Then off he went again, up

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the Avenue, and when I passed the ladder I could see by the hardware fellow's face that he, too, had gotten a special smile from the man: a piece of it was on *his* lips. He took the pliers, scratched his head. I heard him laugh, and then he began to fix his awning as if the pliers were exactly the tool he needed, which I'm sure they were.

I hurried then, because I wanted to see the face of such a man as this, and I hadn't, yet. I caught up with him at 50th Street. He had paused there, waiting for something. Maybe he was waiting to decide which way to go, and maybe he was waiting for me; I don't know. As I drew abreast he turned to face me.

Now, I don't want to disappoint you but I can't tell you what his face was like. All I can say is that it was as neat as the rest of him, everything about it just where it should be. He smiled.

It was like looking into a bright light, but it didn't dazzle. It was warm, like the windows of farmhouses late at night when there's snow. It made me smile too, the biggest, widest smile that ever happened to me, so wide that I heard a little...(ONE CLEAR *CHUCK*, AS WHEN ONE CHUCKS TO A HORSE: BUT ONLY ONE)...somewhere in my back teeth. I must have been bemused for a second or two, because when I blinked the feeling away, the man was gone. Still smiling, I got into a cab that pulled up for the light just then; I suddenly wanted to be home, next to Robin and Tandy and my wife, while I felt just that way.

As the cab started to move, I turned and looked through the rear window, and I saw the man briefly, just once more. One of those poor, cowed, unhappy men had sidled up to him, and in every line of his shabby figure I recognized him and all like him, and I could all but hear the cringing voice, "Dime fer a cuppa cawfee, mister?" And the last thing I saw was the reflection of that incredible smile on the man's dirty face, as Mr. Brown Bowler Hat reached into his impossible pocket and handed the man a thick, steaming china mug of hot coffee and walked on.

I leaned back on the cushions and watched New York streaming past

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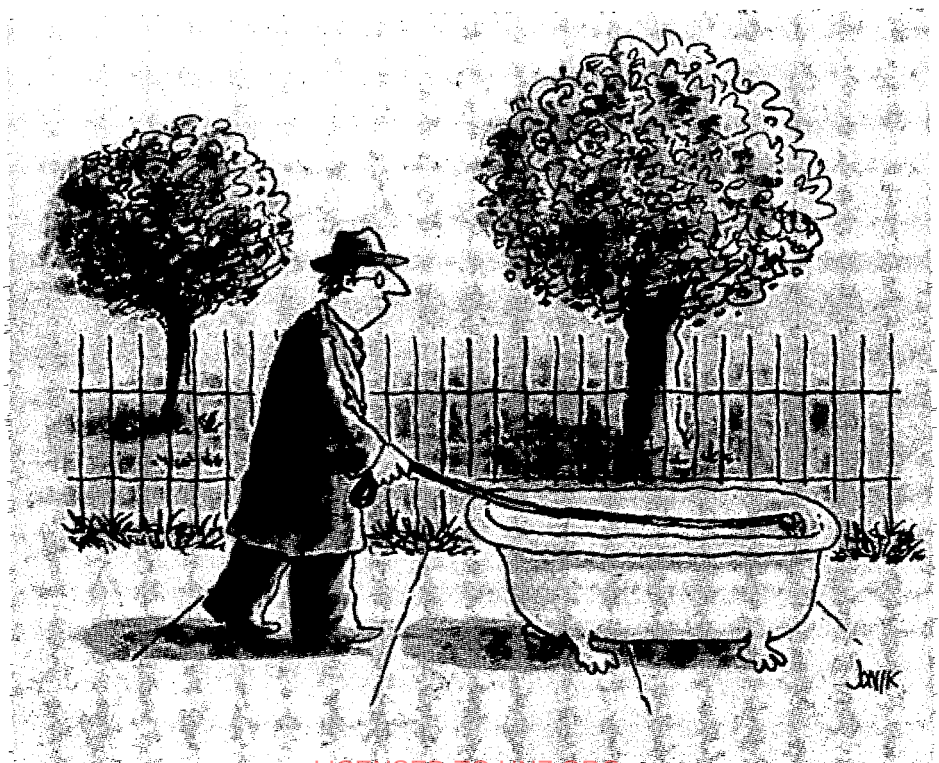
outside, and I thought: well, if this city has something for everyone, then I suppose it has in it a man who can reach into his pocket and grant anyone's smaller, happy-making wishes. And then I thought, he has tickets and tools and cups of coffee and heaven knows what else for other people, but he apparently couldn't give me the one thing I wanted at the time, which was a little story for *Pulse*. So here I am home again, feeling sort of nice because my wife and kids appreciate the bit of smile I brought in, but otherwise disappointed because, whatever else happened, I don't have a story for you. I guess the man in the brown bowler hat didn't have one in his pocket at the time.

Yours very truly,
Theodore Sturgeon

P.S. On the other hand, maybe he did.



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Robert Silverberg's first F&SF *story was "Warm Man" in our May 1957 issue and his most recent was "Tales from the Venia Woods" in our Fortieth Anniversary issue. Both "Venia Woods" and this new one are part of the same "Roma Eterna" series and we're hopeful that Bob will have a book's worth of these stories before our Sixtieth Anniversary issue rolls off the presses. For the moment, most of Mr. Silverberg's energies are directed towards his current Majipoor trilogy, of which the second volume (*Lord Prestimion*) has just been published and the final one (*The King of Dreams*) is in the works.*

A Hero of the Empire

By Robert Silverberg

HERE I AM AT LAST, HORATIUS, in far-off Arabia, amongst the Greeks and the camels and the swarthy Saracen tribesmen and all the other unpleasant creatures that infest this dreary desert. For my sins. My grievous sins. "Get you to Arabia, serpent!" cried the furious Emperor Julian, and here I am. *Serpent.* Me. How could he have been so unkind?

But I tell you, O friend of my bosom, I will employ this time of exile to win my way back into Caesar's good graces somehow. I will do something while I am here, *something*, I know not what just yet, that will remind him of what a shrewd and enterprising and altogether valuable man I am; and sooner or later he will recall me to Roma and restore me to my place at court. Before many years have passed you and I will stroll together along Tiber's sweet banks again. Of this much I am certain, that the gods did not have it in mind for me that I should spin out all my remaining days in so miserable a sandy wasteland as this.

A bleak forlorn place, it is, this Arabia. A bleak disheartening journey it was to get here, too.

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There are, as perhaps you are aware, several Arabias within the vast territory that we know by that general name. In the north lies Arabia Petraea, a prosperous mercantile region bordering on Syria Palaestina. Arabia Petraea has been an Imperial province since the reign of Augustus Caesar, six hundred years ago. Then comes a great deal of emptiness — Arabia Deserta, it is called, a grim, harsh, barren district inhabited mainly by quarrelsome nomads. And on the far side of that lies Arabia Felix, a populous land every bit as happy as its name implies, a place of luxurious climate and easy circumstances, famed for its fertile and productive fields and for the abundance of fine goods that it pours forth into the world's markets, gold and pearls, frankincense and myrrh, balsams and aromatic oils and perfumes.

Which of these places Caesar intended as my place of exile, I did not know. I was told that I would learn that during the course of my journey east. I have an ancient family connection to the eastern part of the world, for in the time of the first Claudius my great ancestor Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo was proconsul of Asia with his seat at Ephesus, and then governor of Syria under Nero, and various other Corbulos since his time have dwelled in those distant regions. It seemed almost agreeable to be renewing the tradition, however involuntary the renewal. Gladly would I have settled for Arabia Petraea if I had to go to Arabia at all: it is a reasonable destination for a highly placed Roman gentleman temporarily out of favor with his monarch. But of course my hopes were centered on Arabia Felix, which by all accounts was the more congenial land.

The voyage from Roma to Syria Palaestina — pfaugh, Horatius! Nightmare. Torture. Seasick every day. Beloved friend, I am no seafaring man. Then came a brief respite in Caesarea Maritima, the one good part, lovely cosmopolitan city, wine flowing freely, complacent pretty girls everywhere, and, yes, Horatius, I must confess it, some pretty boys too. I stayed there as long as I could. But eventually I received word that the caravan that was to take me down into Arabia was ready to depart, and I had to go.

Let no one beguile you with romantic tales of desert travel. For a civilized man it is nothing but torment and agony.

Three steps to the inland side of Jerusalem and you find yourself in the hottest, driest country this side of Hades; and things only get worse from

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there. Every breath you take hits your lungs like a blast from an oven. Your nostrils, your ears, your lips become coated with windborne particles of grit. The sun is like a fiery iron platter in the sky. You go for miles without seeing a single tree or shrub, nothing but rock and red sand. Mocking phantoms dance before you in the shimmering air. At night if you are lucky enough or weary enough to be able to drop off to sleep for a little while, you dream longingly of lakes and gardens and green lawns, but then you are awakened by the scrabbling sound of a scorpion in the sand beside your cheek, and you lie there sobbing in the stifling heat, praying that you will die before the coming of the fiery dawn.

Somewhere in the midst of all this dead wilderness the traveler leaves the province of Syria Palaestina and enters Arabia, though no one can say precisely where the boundary lies. The first thing you come to, once across that invisible line, is the handsome city of Petra of the Nabataeans, an impregnable rock-fortress that stands athwart all the caravan routes. It is a rich city and, aside from the eternal parching heat, quite a livable one. I would not have greatly minded serving out my time of exile there.

But no, no, the letter of instruction from His Imperial Majesty that awaited me in Petra informed me that I needs must go onward, farther south. Arabia Petraea was not the part of Arabia that he had in mind for me. I enjoyed three days of civilized urban amusement there and then I was in the desert again, traveling by camel this time. I will spare you the horrors of that experience. We were heading, they let me know, for the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome on the Red Sea.

Excellent, I thought. This Leuke Kome is the chief port of embarkation for travelers sailing on to Arabia Felix. So they must be sending me to that fertile land of soft breezes and sweet-smelling blossoms, of spices and precious stones. I imagined myself waiting out my seasons of banishment in a cozy little villa beside the sea, nibbling tender dates and studying the fine brandies of the place. Perhaps I would dabble a bit in the frankincense trade or do a little lucrative business in cinnamon and cassia to pass the time.

At Leuke Kome I presented myself to the Imperial legate, a sleek and self-important young popinjay named Florentius Victor, and asked him how long it would be before my ship was to leave. He looked at me blankly. "Ship? What ship? Your route lies overland, my dear Leontius Corbulo."

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He handed me the last of my letters of instruction, by which I was informed that my final destination was a place by the name of Macoraba, where I was to serve as commercial representative of His Imperial Majesty's government, with the special responsibility of resolving any trade conflicts that might arise with such representatives of the Eastern Empire as might be stationed there.

"Macoraba? And just where is that?"

"Why, in Arabia Deserta," said Florentius Victor blandly.

"Arabia Deserta?" I repeated, with a sinking heart.

"Exactly. A very important city, as cities in that part of the world go. Every caravan crossing Arabia has to stop there. Perhaps you've heard of it under its Saracen name. *Mecca* is what the Saracens call it."

ARABIA DESERTA, Horatius! Arabia Deserta! For the trifling crime of tampering with the innocence of his unimportant little British cup-boy, the heartless vindictive Emperor has buried me in this brutal netherworld of remorseless heat and drifting dunes.

I have been in Macoraba — Mecca, I should say — just three or four days, now. It seems like a lifetime already.

What do we have in this land of Arabia Deserta? Why, nothing but a desolate torrid sandy plain intersected by sharp and naked hills. There are no rivers and rain scarcely ever falls. The sun is merciless. The wind is unrelenting. The dunes shift and heave like ocean waves in a storm: whole legions could be buried and lost by a single day's gusts. For trees they have only scrubby little tamarinds and acacias, that take their nourishment from the nightly dews. Here and there one finds pools of brackish water rising from the bowels of the earth, and these afford a bit of green pasture and sometimes some moist ground on which the date-palm and the grapevine can take root, but it is a sparse life indeed for those who have elected to settle in such places.

In the main the Saracens are a wandering race who endlessly guide their flocks of horses and sheep and camels back and forth across this hard arid land, seeking out herbage for their beasts where they can. All the year long they follow the seasons about, moving from seacoast to mountains to plains, so that they can take advantage of such little rainfall as there is,

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falling as it does in different months in these different regions. From time to time they venture farther afield — to the banks of the Nile or the farming villages of Syria or the valley of the Euphrates — to descend as brigands upon the placid farmers of those places and extort their harvests from them.

The harshness of the land makes it a place of danger and distress, of rapine and fear. In their own self-interest the Saracens form themselves into little tribal bands under the absolute government of fierce and ruthless elders; warfare between these tribes is constant; and so vehement is each man's sense of personal honor that offense is all too easily given and private blood-feuds persist down through generation after generation, yet ancient offenses never seem to be wiped out.

Two settlements here have come to be dignified with the name of "cities." Cities, Horatius! Mudholes with walls about them, rather. In the northern part of this desert one finds Iatrippa, which in the Saracens' own tongue is named *Medina*. It has a population of 15,000 or so, and as Arabian villages go is fairly well provided with water, so that it possesses abundant date-groves, and its people live comfortable lives, as comfort is understood in this land.

Then, a ten-day caravan journey to the south, through somber thorny land broken now and then by jutting crags of dark stone, is the town our geographers know as Macoraba, the *Mecca* of the locals. This Mecca is a bigger place, perhaps 25,000 people, and it is of such ineffable ugliness that Virgil himself would not have been able to conceive of it. Imagine, if you will, a "city" whose buildings are drab hovels of mud and brick, strung out along a rocky plain a mile wide and two miles long that lies at the foot of three stark mountains void of all vegetation. The flinty soil is useless for agriculture. The one sizable well yields bitter water. The nearest pasture land is fifty miles away. I have never seen so unprepossessing a site for human habitation.

You can readily guess, I think, which of the two cities of Arabia Deserta our gracious Emperor chose as my place of exile.

"Why," said I to Nicomedes the Paphlagonian, who was kind enough to invite me to be his dinner guest on my second depressing night in Mecca, "would anyone in his right mind have chosen to found a city in a location of this sort?"

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Nicomedes, as his name will have indicated, is a Greek. He is the legate in Arabia Deserta of our Emperor's royal colleague, the Eastern Emperor Maurice Tiberius, and he is, I suspect, the real reason why I have been sent here, as I will explain shortly.

"It's in the middle of nowhere," I said. "We're forty miles from the sea and on the other side there's hundreds of miles of empty desert. Nothing will grow here. The climate is appalling and the ground is mostly rock. I can't see the slightest reason why any person, even a Saracen, would want to live here."

Nicomedes the Paphlagonian, who is a handsome man of about fifty with thick white hair and affable blue eyes, smiled and nodded. "I'll give you two, my friend. One is that nearly all commerce in Arabia is handled by caravan. The Red Sea is a place of tricky currents and treacherous reefs. Sailors abhor it. Therefore in Arabia goods travel mainly by land, and all the caravans have to pass this way, because Mecca is situated precisely at the mid-point between Damascus up north and the thriving cities of Arabia Felix down below us, and it also commands the one passable east-west route across the remarkably dreadful desert that lies between the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. The caravans that come here are richly laden indeed, and the merchants and hostelkeepers and tax-collectors of Mecca do the kind of lively business that middlemen always do. You should know, my dear Leontius Corbulo, that there are a great many very wealthy men in this town."

He paused and poured more wine for us: some wonderful sweet stuff from Rhodes, hardly what I would have expected anyone in this remote outpost to keep on hand for casual guests.

"You said there were two reasons," I reminded him, after a time.

"Oh, yes. Yes." He had not forgotten. He is an unhurried man. "This is also a sacred city, do you see? There is a shrine in Mecca, a sanctuary, which they call the Kaaba. You should visit it tomorrow. It'll be good for you to get out and about town: it will make the time pass more cheerfully. Look for a squat little cubical building of black stone in the center of a great plaza. It's quite unsightly, but unimaginably holy in Saracen eyes. It contains some sort of lump of rock that fell from heaven, which they think of as a god. The Saracen tribesmen from all over the country make pilgrimages here to worship at the Kaaba. They march round and round it,

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bowing to the stone, kissing it, sacrificing sheep and camels to it, and afterward they gather in the taverns and hold recitations of war poetry and amorous verses. Very beautiful poetry, in its own barbarous fashion, I think. These pilgrims come here by the *thousands*. There's money in having the national shrine in your town, Corbulo: big money."

His eyes were gleaming. How the Greeks love moneymaking!

"Then, too," he went on, "the chieftains of Mecca have very shrewdly proclaimed that in the holy city all feuds and tribal wars are strictly forbidden during these great religious festivals. — You know about the Saracens and their feuds? Well, you'll learn. At any rate, it's very useful to everybody in this country for one city to be set aside as a place where you don't have to be afraid of getting a scimitar in your gut if you chance to meet the wrong person while crossing the street. A lot of business gets done here during the times of truce between people from tribes that hate each other the rest of the year. And the Meccans take their cut, do you follow me? That is the life of the city: collecting percentages on everything. Oh, this may be a dismal hideous town, Corbulo, but there are men living here who could buy the likes of you and me in lots of two dozen."

"I see." I paused just a moment. "And the Eastern Empire, I take it, must be developing significant business interests in this part of Arabia, or else why would the Eastern Emperor have stationed a high official like you here?"

"We're beginning to have a little trade with the Saracens, yes," the Greek said. "Just a little." And he filled my glass yet again.

The next day — hot, dry, dusty, like every day here — I did go to look at this Kaaba of theirs. Not at all hard to find: right in the center of town, in fact, standing by itself in the midst of an empty square of enormous size. The holy building itself was unimposing, perhaps fifty feet high at best, covered completely by a thick veil of black cloth. I think you could have put the thing down in the courtyard of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus or any of Roma's other great temples and it would utterly disappear from view.

This did not seem to be pilgrimage season. There was no one around the Kaaba but a dozen or so Saracen guards. They were armed with such formidable swords, and looked so generally unfriendly, that I chose not to make a closer inspection of the shrine.

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My early wanderings through the town showed me very little that indicated the presence of the prosperity that Nicomedes the Paphlagonian had claimed was to be found here. But in the course of the next few days I came gradually to understand that the Saracens are not a people to flaunt their wealth, but prefer instead to conceal it behind unadorned facades. Now and again I would have a peek through a momentarily opened gate into a briefly visible courtyard and got the sense of a palatial building hidden back there, or I would see some merchant and his wife, richly robed and laden with jewels and gold chains, climbing into a shrouded sedan-chair, and I knew from such fitful glimpses that this must indeed be a wealthier city than it looked. Which explains, no doubt, why our Greek cousins have started to find it so appealing.

These Saracens are a handsome people, lean and finely made, very dark of skin, dark hair and eyes as well, with sharp features and prominent brows. They wear airy white robes and the women go veiled, I suppose to protect their skins against the blowing sand. Thus far I have seen more than a few young men who might be of interest to me, and they gave me quick flashing looks, too, that indicated response, though it was far too soon to take any such risks here. The maidens also are lovely. But they are very well guarded.

My own situation here is more pleasing, or at least less displeasing, than I had feared. I feel the pain of my isolation, of course. There are no other Westerners. Greek is widely understood by the better class of Saracens, but I yearn already for the sound of good honest Latin. Still, it has been arranged for me to have a walled villa, of modest size but decent enough, at the edge of town nearest the mountains. If only it had proper baths, it would be perfect; but in a land without water there is no understanding of baths. A great pity, that. The villa belongs to a merchant of Syrian origin who will be spending the next two or three years traveling abroad. I have inherited five of his servants as well. A wardrobe of clothing in the local style has been provided for me.

It all might have been much worse, eh?

But in truth they couldn't simply have left me to shift for myself in this strange land. I am still an official of the Imperial court, after all, even though I happen currently to be in disfavor and exile. I am here on Imperial business, you know. It was not just out of mere pique that Julian shipped

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me here, even though I had angered him mightily by getting to his cup-boy before him. I realize now that he must have been looking for an excuse to send someone to this place who could serve unofficially as an observer for him, and I inadvertently gave him the pretext he needed.

Do you understand? He is worried about the Greeks, who evidently have set about the process of extending their authority into this part of the world, which has always been more or less independent of the Empire. My formal assignment, as I have said, is to investigate the possibilities of expanding Roman business interests in Arabia Deserta — *Western* Roman, that is. But I have a covert assignment as well, one so covert that not even I have been informed of its nature, that has to do with the growing power of Romans of the other sort in that region.

What I am saying, in ordinary language, is that I am actually a spy, sent here to keep watch over the Greeks.

Yes, I know, it is all one empire that happens to have two emperors, and we of the West are supposed to look upon the Greeks as our cousins and co-administrators of the world, not as our rivals. Sometimes it actually does work that way, I will concede. As in the time of Maximilianus III, for example, when the Greeks helped us put an end to the disturbances that the Goths and Vandals and Huns and other barbarians were creating along our northern frontier. And then again a generation later, when Heraclius II sent Western legions to help the Eastern Emperor Justinian smash the forces of Persia that had been causing the Greeks such trouble to the east for so many years. Those were, of course, the two great military strokes that eliminated the Empire's enemies for good and laid the foundations for the era of eternal peace and safety in which we live now.

But an excess of peace and safety, Horatius, can bring niggling little problems of its own. With no external enemies left to worry about, the Eastern and Western Empires are beginning to jockey with each other for advantage. Everybody understands that, though no one says it aloud. There was that time, let me remind you, when the ambassador of Maurice Tiberius came to court, bearing a casket of pearls as a gift for Caesar. I was there. "Et dona ferentes," said Julian to me under his breath, as the casket was uncovered. The line every schoolboy knows: *I fear Greeks even when bringing gifts.*

Is the Eastern Empire trying to put a drawstring around the midsection

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of Arabia, and by so doing to gain control over the trade in spices and other precious exotic merchandise that passes this way? It would not be a good thing for us to become altogether dependent on the Greeks for our cinnamon and our cardamom, our frankincense and our indigo. The very steel of our swords comes westward to us out of Persia by way of this Arabia, and the horses that draw our chariots are Arabian horses.

And so the Emperor Julian, feigning great wrath and loudly calling me a serpent before all the court when the matter of the little cup-bearer became known, has thrust me into this parched land primarily to find out what the Greeks are really up to here, and perhaps also to establish certain political connections with powerful Saracens myself, connections that he can employ in blocking the Eastern Empire's apparent foray into these regions. Or so I do believe, Horatius. So I *must* believe, and I must make Caesar believe it himself. For it is only by doing some great service for the Emperor that I can redeem myself from this woeful place and win my way back to Roma, to Caesar's side and to yours, my sweet friend, to yours.

THE NIGHT BEFORE last — I have been in Mecca eight days, now — Nicomedes invited me once again for dinner. He was dressed, as I was, in white Saracen robes, and wore a lovely dagger in a jeweled sheath strapped to his waist. I glanced quickly at it, feeling some surprise at being greeted by a host who wore a weapon; but instantly he took the thing off and presented it to me. He had mistaken my concern for admiration, and it is a Saracen custom, I have learned, to bestow upon one's guests anything in one's household that the guest might choose to admire.

We dined this time not in the tiled parlor where he had entertained me previously but in a cool courtyard beside a plashing fountain. The possession of such a fountain is a token of great luxury in this dry land. His servants brought us an array of fine wines and sweetmeats and cool sherbets. I could see that Nicomedes had modeled his manner of living after the style of the leading merchants of the city, and was reveling in that.

I had not been there very long when I got right down to the central issue: that is, what exactly it was that the Greek Emperor hoped to accomplish by stationing a royal legate in Mecca. Sometimes, I think, the

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best way for a spy to learn what he needs to learn is to put aside all guile and play the role of a simple, straightforward, ingenuous man who merely speaks his heart.

So as we sat over roast mutton and plump dates in warm milk I said, "Is it the Eastern Emperor's hope to incorporate Arabia into the Empire, then?"

Nicomedes laughed. "Oh, we're not so foolish as to think we can do that. No one's ever been able to conquer this place, you know. The Egyptians tried it, and the Persians of Cyrus's time, and Alexander the Great. Augustus sent an expedition in here, ten thousand men, six months to fight their way in and sixty days of horrible retreat. I think Trajan made an attempt too. The thing is, Corbulo, these Saracens are free men, free *within themselves*, which is a kind of freedom that you and I are simply not equipped to comprehend. They can't be conquered because they can't be governed. Trying to conquer them is like trying to conquer lions or tigers. You can whip a lion or even kill it, yes, but you can't possibly impose your will on it even if you keep it in a cage for twenty years. These are a race of lions here. Government as we understand it is a concept that can never exist here."

"They are organized into tribes, aren't they? That's a sort of government."

He shrugged. "Built out of nothing more than family loyalty. You can't fashion any sort of national administration out of it. Kinsman looks after kinsman and everybody else is regarded as a potential enemy. There are no kings here, do you realize that? Never have been. Just tribal chieftains — *emirs*, they call them. A land without kings is never going to submit to an emperor. We could fill this entire peninsula with soldiers, fifty legions, and the Saracens would simply melt away into the desert and pick us off one by one from a distance with javelins and arrows. An invisible enemy striking at us from a terrain that we can't survive in. They're unconquerable, Corbulo. Unconquerable."

There was passion in his voice, and apparent sincerity. The Greeks are good at apparent sincerity.

I said, "So the best you're looking for is some kind of trade agreement, is that it? Just an informal Byzantine presence, not any actual incorporation of the region into the Empire."

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He nodded. "That's about right. Is your Emperor bothered by that?"

"It's drawn his attention, I would say. We wouldn't want to lose access to the goods we obtain from this part of the world. And also those from places like India to the east that normally ship their merchandise westward by way of Arabia."

"But why would that happen, my dear Corbulo? This is a single empire, is it not? Julian II rules from Roma and Maurice Tiberius rules from Constantinopolis, but they rule jointly for the common good of all Roman citizens everywhere. As has been the case since the great Constantinus divided the realm in the first place three hundred years ago."

Yes. Of course. That is the official line. But I know better and you know better and Nicomedes the Paphlagonian knew better too. I had pushed the issue as far as seemed appropriate just then, however. It was time to move on to more frivolous topics.

I found, though, that dropping the matter was not all that easily done. Having voiced my suspicions, I thereby had invited counterargument, and Nicomedes was not finished providing it. I had no choice but to listen while he wove such a web of words about me that it completely captured me into his way of thinking. The Greeks are damnably clever with words, of course; and he had lulled me with sweet wines and surfeited me with an abundance of fine food so that I was altogether unable just then to refute and rebut, and before he was done with me my mind was utterly spun around on the subject of East versus West.

He assured me in twenty different ways that an expansion of the Eastern Empire's influence into Arabia Deserta, if such a thing were to take place, would not in any way jeopardize existing Western Roman trade in Arabian or Indian merchandise. Arabia Petraea just to the north had long been under the Eastern Empire's administration, he pointed out, and that was true also of the provinces of Syria Palaestina and Aiguptos and Cappadocia and Mesopotamia and all those other sunny eastern lands that Constantinus, at the time of the original division of the realm, had placed under the jurisdiction of the Emperor who would sit at Constantinopolis. Did I believe that the prosperity of the Western Empire was in any way hampered by having those provinces under Byzantine administration? Had I not just traveled freely through many of those provinces on my way

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here? Was there not a multitude of Western Roman merchants resident in them, and were they not free to do business there as they wished?

I could not contest any of that. I wanted to disagree, to summon up a hundred instances of subtle Eastern interference with Western trade, but just then I could not offer even one.

Believe me, Horatius, at that moment I found myself quite unable to understand why I had ever conceived such a mistrust of Greek intentions. They are indeed our cousins, I told myself. They are Greek Romans and we are Roman Romans, yes, but the Empire itself is one entity, chosen by the gods to rule the world. A gold piece struck in Constantinopolis is identical in weight and design to one struck in Roma. One bears the name and face of the Eastern Emperor, one the name and face of the Emperor of the West, but all else is the same. The coins of one realm pass freely in the other. Their prosperity is our prosperity; our prosperity is theirs. And so on and so forth.

But as I thought these things, Horatius, I also realized gloomily that by so doing I was undercutting in my own mind my one tenuous hope of freeing myself from this land of burning sands and stark treeless hills. As I noted in my most recent letter, what I need is some way of saying, "Look, Caesar, how well I have served you!" so that he would say in return, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," and summon me back to the pleasures of the court. For that to occur, though, I must show Caesar that he has enemies here, and give him the way of dealing with those enemies. But what enemies? Who? Where?

We were done with our meal now. Nicomedes clapped his hands and a servitor brought a flask of some rich golden brandy that came, he said, from a desert principality on the shores of the Persian Gulf. It dazzled my palate and further befogged my mind.

He conducted me, then, through the rooms of his villa, pointing out the highlights of what even in my blurred condition I could see was an extraordinary collection of antiquities and curios: fine Greek bronze figurines, majestic sculptures from Egypt done in black stone, strange wooden masks of barbaric design that came, he said, from the unknown lands of torrid Africa, and much, much more.

He spoke of each piece with the deepest knowledge. By now I had come to see that my host was not only a devious diplomat but also a person

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of some power and consequence in the Eastern realm, and a scholar of note besides. I was grateful to him for having reached out so generously to me in these early days of my lonely exile — to the displaced and unhappy Roman nobleman, bereft of all that was familiar to him, a stranger in a strange land. But I knew also that I was *meant* to be grateful to him, that it was his purpose to ensnare me in the bonds of friendship and obligation, so that I would have nothing but good things to say about the Greek legate in Mecca should I ever return to my master the Emperor Julian II.

Would I ever return, though? That was the question.

That *is* the question, yes. Will I ever see Roma of the green hills and shining marble palaces again, Horatius, or am I doomed to bake in the heat of this oven of a desert forever?

HAVING NO occupation here and having as yet found no friends other than Nicomedes, whose companionship I could not presume to demand too often, I whiled away the days that followed in close exploration of the town.

The shock of finding myself resident in this squalid little place has begun to wear off. I have started to adapt, to some degree, to the change that has come over my existence. The pleasures of Roma are no longer mine to have; very well, I must search out such diversion as is to be found here, for there is no place in the world, humble though it be, that does not offer diversion of some sort to him who has eyes for finding it.

So in these days since my last letter I have roamed from one end of Mecca to the other, up and down the broad though unpaved boulevards and into many of the narrow lanes and byways that intersect them. My presence does not appear to be greatly troublesome to anyone, although from time to time I do become cognizant that I am the object of someone's cold, gleaming stare.

I am, as you know, the only Roman of the West in Mecca, but scarcely the only foreigner. In the various marketplaces I have seen Persians, Syrians, Ethiopians, and of course a good many Greeks. There are numerous Indians here as well, dark lithe people with conspicuous luminous eyes, and also some Hebrews, these being a people who live mainly over in Aiguptos, just on the other side of the Red Sea from Arabia. They have

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been resident in Aiguptos for thousands of years, though evidently they were originally a desert tribe from some country much like this one, and they are not in any way Aiguptian in language or culture or religion. These Hebrews have in modern times begun to spread from their home along the Nilus into the lands adjacent, and there are more than a few of them here. Nicomedes has spoken of them to me.

They are unusual people, the Hebrews. The most interesting thing about them is that they believe there is only one god, a harsh and austere deity who cannot be seen and who must not be portrayed in images of any sort. They have nothing but contempt for the gods of other races, deeming them wholly imaginary, mere creatures of fable and fantasy that possess no true existence. This may very likely be the case, certainly: who among us has ever laid eyes on Apollo or Mercury or Minerva? Most people, however, have the good sense not to make a mockery of the religious practices of others, whereas the Hebrews apparently cannot keep themselves from trumpeting the virtues of their own odd species of belief while denouncing everybody else most vociferously as idolaters and fools.

As you can readily imagine, this does not make them very popular among their neighbors. But they are an industrious folk, with special aptitudes for the sciences of agriculture and irrigation, and a notable knack, also, for finance and trade, which is why Nicomedes has paid such attention to them. He tells me that they own most of the best land in the northern part of the country, that they are the chief bankers here in Mecca, and that they control the markets in weapons, armor, and agricultural tools everywhere in the land. It seems advantageous for me to get to know one or two important Hebrews of Mecca and I have made attempts to do so, thus far without any success, during the course of my ramblings in the marketplaces.

The markets here are very specialized, each offering its own kind of merchandise. I have visited them all by now.

There is a spice-market, of course: great sacks of pepper both black and white, and garlic and cumin and saffron, sandalwood and cassia, aloes, spikenard, and an aromatic dried leaf that they call malabathron, and hosts of other things I could not begin to name. There is a camel-market, only on certain days of the week, where those strange beasts are bought and sold in heated bargaining that goes to the edge of actual combat. I went

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up to one of these creatures to see it better and it yawned in my face as though I were the dullest of rogues. There is a market for cloth, which deals in muslins and silks and cotton both Indian and Aiguptian, and a market where crude idols of many kinds are sold to the credulous — I saw a Hebrew man walk past it, and spit and glare and make what I think was a holy sign of his people — and a market for wines, and one for perfumes, and the market of meat and the one of grains, and the market where the Hebrew merchants sell their iron goods, and one for fruits of all kinds, pomegranates and quinces and citrons and lemons and sour oranges and grapes and peaches, all this in the midst of the most forbidding desert you could imagine!

And also there is a market for slaves, which is where I encountered the remarkable man who called himself Mahmud.

The slave-market of Mecca is as bustling as any slave-market anywhere, which illustrates how great a degree of prosperity lies behind the deceptively shabby facade this city displays to strangers. It is the great flesh-mart of the land, and buyers sometimes come from as far away as Syria and the Persian Gulf to check out the slavemongers' latest haul of desirable human exotica.

Though wood is a luxury in this desert country, there is the usual platform of planks and timbers, the usual awning suspended from a couple of poles, the usual sorry huddle of naked merchandise waiting to be sold. As usual, they were a mix of all races, though with a distinct Asian and African cast, here: Ethiops dark as night and brawny Nubians even darker, and flat-faced fair-skinned Circassians and Avars and other sinewy northern folk, and some who might have been Persians or Indians, and even a sullen yellow-haired man who could have been a Briton or Teuton. The auctions were conducted, quite naturally, in the Saracen tongue, so that I understood nothing of what was said, but I suppose it was the customary fraudulent gabble that fools no one, how this buxom sultry Turkish wench was a king's daughter in her own land, and this thick-bearded scowling Libyan had been a charioteer of the highest distinction before his master's bankruptcy had forced his sale, and so forth.

It so happened that I was passing the auction-place at noonday three days past when three supple tawny-skinned wantons, who from their shameless movements and smiles must have been very skilled prostitutes

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indeed, came up for sale as a single lot, intended perhaps as concubines for some great emir. They wore nothing but jingling bracelets of silver coins about their wrists and ankles, and were laughing and thrusting their breasts from side to side and winking at the crowd to invite active bidding on behalf of their seller, who for all I know was their uncle or their brother.

The spectacle was so lively that I paused to observe it a moment. Hardly had I taken my place in the crowd, though, than the man standing just to my left surprised me by turning toward me and muttering, in a vibrant tone of intense fury powerfully contained, "Ah, the swine! They should be whipped and turned out into the desert for the jackals to eat!" This he said in quite passable Greek, uttering the words in a low whisper that nonetheless was strikingly rich and captivating, one of the most musical speaking voices I have ever heard. It was as though the words had overflowed his soul and he had had no choice but to utter them at once to the man closest at hand.

The power of that extraordinary voice and the violence of his sentiment had the most singular effect on me. It was as though I had been seized by the wrist in an irresistible grip. I stared at him. He was holding himself taut as a bowstring when the archer is at the verge of letting fly, and appeared to be trembling with wrath.

Some sort of response seemed incumbent on me. The best I could do was to say, "The girls, do you mean?"

"The slavemasters," said he. "The women are but chattel. They are not to be held accountable. But it is wrong to put chattel out for pandering, as these criminals do."

And then, relaxing his stance a bit and looking now somewhat abashed at his forwardness, he said in a far less assertive tone of voice, "But you must forgive me for pouring these thoughts into the unwilling ears of a stranger who surely has no interest in hearing such things."

"On the contrary. What you say interests me greatly. Indeed, you must tell me more."

I studied him with no little curiosity. It had crossed my mind immediately that he might be a Hebrew: his horror and rage at the sight of this trifling bit of flesh-peddling seemed to mark him as a kinsman of that dour man who had made such a display of irate piety in the marketplace of idols. You will recall that I had resolved to seek contact

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with members of that agile-minded race of merchants here. But a moment's closer examination of his look and garb led me now to realize that he must be pure Saracen by blood.

There was tremendous presence and force about him. He was tall and slender, a handsome dark-haired man of perhaps thirty-five years or a little more, with a dense flowing beard, piercing eyes, and a warm and gracious smile that quite contradicted the unnerving ferocity of his gaze. His princely bearing, his eloquent manner of speech, and the fineness of his garments all suggested that he was a man of wealth and breeding, well connected in this city. At once I sensed that he might be even more useful to me than any Hebrew. So I drew him out, questioning him a little on the reasons for his spontaneous outburst against the trade in easy women in this marketplace, and without the slightest hesitation he poured forth a powerful and lengthy tirade, fierce in content although stated in that same captivating musical tone, against the totality of the sins of his countrymen. And what a multitude of sins they were! Mere prostitution was the least of them. I had not expected to encounter such a Cato here.

"Look about you!" he urged me. "Mecca is an utter abyss of wickedness. Do you see the idols that are sold everywhere, and set up piously in shops and homes in places of respect? They are false gods, these images, for the true god, and He is One, cannot be rendered by any image. —Do you observe the flagrant cheating in the marketplaces? —Do you see the men lying shamelessly to their wives, and the wives lying as well, and the gambling and the drinking and the whoring, and the quarreling between brother and brother?" And there was much more. I could see that he held this catalog of outrage pent up in his breast at all times, ready to issue it forth whenever he found some new willing listener. Yet he said all this not in any lofty and superior way, but almost in bewilderment: he was saddened rather than infuriated by the failings of his brethren, or so it seemed to me.

Then he paused, once again changing tone, as though it had occurred to him that it was impolite to remain in this high denunciatory mode for any great length of time. "Again I ask you to pardon me for my excess of zeal. I feel very strongly on these matters. It is the worst of my faults, I hope. —If I am not mistaken, you are the Roman who has come to live among us?"

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"Yes. Leontius Corbulo, at your service. A Roman of the Romans, I like to say." I gave him a flourish. "My family is a very ancient one, with historic ties to Syria and other parts of Asia."

"Indeed. I am Mahmud son of Abdallah, who was the son of — " well, the son of I forget whom, who was the son of so-and-so, the son of someone else. It is the custom of these Saracens to let you have their pedigrees five or six generations back in a single outburst of breath, but it was impossible for me to retain most of the barbarous outlandish names in my mind very long. I do recall his telling me that he was a member of one of the great mercantile clans of Mecca, which is called something like the *Koreish*.

It seemed to me that a strong rapport had arisen between us in just these few moments, and, such was the power of his personality, I was reluctant to leave him. Since it was the time for the midday meal, I proposed that we take it together, and invited him to come with me to my villa. But he responded that I was a guest in Mecca and it was not fitting for him to enjoy my hospitality until I had partaken of his. I didn't try to dispute the issue. The Saracens, I had already begun to learn, are most punctilious about this sort of thing. "Come," he said, beckoning. And so it was that for the first time I entered the home of a wealthy merchant of Mecca.

The villa of Mahmud son of Abdallah was not unlike that of Nicomedes, though on a larger scale — walled courtyard, central fountain, bright airy rooms, inlays of vividly colored tile set in the walls. But unlike Nicomedes, Mahmud was no collector of antiquities. He appeared to have scarcely any possessions at all. A prevailing austerity of decoration was the rule in his house. And of course there was no sign anywhere in it of the idols that other Meccans seemed to cherish.

The wife of Mahmud made a fleeting appearance. Her name was something like Kadija, and she seemed considerably older than her husband, a fact soon confirmed from Mahmud's own lips. A couple of daughters passed to and fro in equally brief manner. But he and I dined alone, seated on straw mats in the center of a huge bare room. Mahmud sat crosslegged like a tailor, and appeared to be entirely at ease in that posture. I tried but failed to manage it, and after a time fell into the normal reclining position, wishing mightily that I had a cushion for my elbow, but

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not willing to give offense by asking for one. The meal itself was simple, grilled meat and a stew of barley and melons, with nothing but water to wash it down. Mahmud did not, it seemed, care for wine.

He spoke of himself with complete openness, as though we were kinsmen from widely distant lands who were meeting for the first time. I learned that Mahmud's father had died before his birth and his mother had lived only a short while thereafter, so he had grown up in impoverished circumstances under the guardianship of an uncle. From his tale I received the impression of a lonely childhood spent wandering the cheerless rocky hills beyond town, pondering from an early age, perhaps, the great questions of eternity and the spirit that plainly have continued to obsess him to this day.

In his twenty-fifth year, said Mahmud, he entered into the service of the woman Kadija, a wealthy widow fifteen years his senior, who soon fell in love with him and asked him to be her husband. This he told me with no trace of embarrassment at all, and I suppose he has no reason to feel any. A look of happiness comes into his eyes when he speaks of her. She has borne him both sons and daughters, though only the daughters have survived. The prosperity that he enjoys today is, I gather, the result of his skillful management of the property that his wife brought to their union.

About Roma, Constantinopolis, or any other place beyond the frontiers of Arabia Deserta, he asked me nothing whatever. Though his intelligence is deep and questing, he did not seem concerned with the empires of this world. It appears that he has scarcely been outside Mecca at all, though he mentioned having made a journey as far as Damascus on one occasion. I would think him a simple man if I did not know, Horatius, how complex in fact he is.

The great preoccupation of his life is his concept of the One God.

This is, of course, the idea famously advocated since antiquity by the Hebrews. I have no doubt that Mahmud has had conversations with the members of that race who live in Mecca, and that their ideas have affected his philosophy. He must surely have heard them express their reverence for their aloof and unknowable god, and their contempt for the superstitions of the Meccans, who cherish such a multitude of idols and talismans and practice a credulous veneration of the sun and the moon and stars and planets and a myriad of demons. He makes no secret of this: I heard him

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make reference to an ancient Hebrew prophet called Abraham, who is apparently a figure he greatly admires, and also a certain Moses, a later leader of that tribe.

But he lays claim to a separate revelation of his own. He asserts that his special enlightenment came as the result of arduous private prayer and contemplation. He would go up often into the mountains behind the town and meditate in solitude in a secluded cave; and one day an awareness of the Oneness of God was revealed to him as though by a divine messenger.

Mahmud calls this god "Allah." A marvelous transformation comes over him when he begins to speak of him. His face glows; his eyes take on the quality of beacons; his very voice becomes such a thing of music and poetry that you would think you were in the presence of Apollo.

It is impossible, he says, ever to understand the nature of Allah. He is too far above us for that. Other people may regard their gods as personages in some kind of story, and tell lively fanciful tales of their travels throughout the world and their quarrels with their wives and their adventures on the battlefield, and make statues of them that show them as men and women, but Allah is not like that. One does not tell tales about Allah. He cannot be thought of as a tall man with a commanding face and a full beard and a host of passions — someone rather like an Emperor, let us say, but on a larger scale — and it is foolishness, as well as blasphemy, to make representations of him the way the ancient Greeks did of such gods of theirs as Zeus and Aphrodite and Poseidon, or we do of Jupiter or Venus or Mars. Allah is the creative force itself, the maker of the universe, too mighty and vast to be captured by any sort of representation.

I asked Mahmud how, if it is blasphemous to imagine a face for his god, it can be acceptable to give him a name. For surely that is a kind of representation also. Mahmud seemed pleased at the sharpness of my question; and he explained that "Allah" is not actually a name, as "Mahmud" or "Leontius Corbulo" or "Jupiter" are names, but is a mere word, simply the term in the Saracen language that means *the god.*

To Mahmud, the fact that there is only one god, whose nature is abstract and incomprehensible to mortals, is the great sublime law from which all other laws flow. This will probably make no more sense to you, Horatius, than it does to me, but it is not our business to be philosophers. What is of interest here is that the man has such a passionate belief in the

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things he believes. So passionate is it that as you listen to him you become caught up in the simplicity and the beauty of his ideas and the power of his way of speaking of them, and you are almost ready to cry out your belief in Allah yourself.

It is a very simple creed indeed, but enormously powerful in its directness, the way things in this harsh and uncompromising desert land tend to be. He stringently rejects all idol-worship, all fable-making, all notions of how the movements of the stars and planets govern our lives. He places no trust in oracles or sorcery. The decrees of kings and princes mean very little to him either. He accepts only the authority of his remote and awesome and inflexible god, whose great stern decree it is that we live virtuous lives of hard work, piety, and respect for our fellow men. Those who live by Allah's law, says Mahmud, will be gathered into paradise at the end of their days; those who do not will descend into the most terrible of hells. And Mahmud does not intend to rest until all Arabia has been brought forth out of sloth and degeneracy and sin to accept the supremacy of the One God, and its scattered squabbling tribes forged at last into a single great nation under the rule of one invincible king who could enforce the laws of that god.

He was awesome in his conviction. By the time he was done, I was close to feeling the presence and might of Allah myself. That was surprising and a little frightening, that Mahmud could stir such feelings in me, of all people. I was amazed. But then he had finished his expounding, and after a few moments the sensation ebbed and I was myself again.

"What do you say?" he asked me. "Can this be anything other than the truth?"

"I am not in a position to judge that," said I carefully, not wishing to give offense to this interesting new friend, especially in his own dining hall. "We Romans are accustomed to regarding all creeds with tolerance, and if you ever visit our capital you will find temples of a hundred faiths standing side by side. But I do see the beauty of your teachings."

"Beauty? I asked about truth. When you say you accept all faiths as equally true, what you really say is that you see no truth in any of them, is that not so?"

I disputed that, reaching into my school days for maxims out of Plato and Marcus Aurelius to argue that all gods are reflections of the true

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godhood. But it was no use. He saw instantly through my Roman indifference to religion. If you claim to believe, as we do, that this god is just as good as that one, what you are really saying is that gods in general don't matter much at all. Our live-and-let-live policy toward the worship of Mithra and Dagon and Baal and all the other deities whose temples thrive in Roma is a tacit admission of that view. And for Mahmud that is a contemptible position.

Sensing the tension that was rising in him, and unwilling to have our pleasant conversation turn acrid, I offered a plea of fatigue, and promised to continue the discussion with him at another time.

In the evening, having been invited yet again to dine with Nicomedes the Paphlagonian and with my head still spinning from the thrust of all that Mahmud had imparted to me, I asked him if he could tell me anything about this extraordinary person.

"That man!" Nicomedes said, chuckling. "Consorting with madmen, are you, now, Corbulo?"

"He seemed quite sane to me."

"Oh, he is, he is, at least when he's selling you a pair of camels or a sack of saffron. But get him started on the subject of religion and you'll see a different man."

"As a matter of fact, we had quite a lengthy philosophical discussion, he and I, this very afternoon," I said. "I found it fascinating. I've never heard anything quite like it."

"I dare say you haven't. Poor chap, he should get himself away from this place while he's still got the chance. If he keeps on going the way I understand he's been doing lately, he'll turn up dead out in the dunes one of these days, and no one will be surprised."

"I don't follow you."

"Preaching against the idols the way he does, is what I mean. You know, Corbulo, they worship three hundred different gods in this city, and each one has his own shrine and his own priesthood and his own busy factory dedicated to making idols for sale to pilgrims, and so on and so forth. If I understand your Mahmud correctly, he'd like to shut all that down. Is that not so?"

"I suppose. Certainly he expressed plenty of scorn for idols and idolaters."

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"Indeed he does. Up till now he's simply had a little private cult, though, half a dozen members of his own family. They get together in his house and pray to his particular god in the particular way that Mahmud prescribes. An innocent enough pastime, I'd say. But lately, I'm told, he's been spreading his ideas farther afield, going around to this person and that and testing out his seditious ideas about how to reform Saracen society on them. As he did with you this very day, it seems. Well, it does no harm for him to be talking religion with somebody like you or me, because we Romans are pretty casual about such matters. But the Saracens aren't. Before long, mark my words, he'll decide to set himself up as a prophet who preaches in public, and he'll stand in the main square threatening fire and damnation to anybody who keeps to the old ways, and then they'll have to kill him. The old ways are big business here, and what this town is about is business and nothing but business. Mahmud is full of subversive notions that these Meccans can't afford to indulge. He'd better watch his step." And then, with a grin: "But he is an amusing devil, isn't he, Corbulo? As you can tell, I've had a chat or two with him myself."

If you ask me, Horatius, Nicomedes is half right and half wrong about Mahmud.

Surely he's correct that Mahmud is almost ready to begin preaching his religion in public. The way he accosted me, a total stranger, at the slave-market testifies to that. And his talk of not resting until Arabia has been made to accept the supremacy of the One God: what else can that mean, other than that he is on the verge of speaking out against the idolaters?

Mahmud told me in just so many words, during our lunch together, that the way Allah makes his commandments concerning good and evil known to mankind is through certain chosen prophets, one every thousand years or so. Abraham and Moses of the Hebrews were such prophets, Mahmud says. I do believe that Mahmud looks upon himself as their successor.

I think the Greek is wrong, though, in saying that Mahmud will be killed by his angry neighbors for speaking out against their superstitions. No doubt they'll *want* to kill him, at first. If his teachings ever prevail, they'll throw the whole horde of priests and idol-carvers out of business

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and knock a great hole in the local economy, and nobody here is going to be very enthusiastic about that. But his personality is so powerful that I think he'll win them over. By Jupiter, he practically had *me* willing to accept the divine omnipotence of Allah before he was done! He'll find a way to put his ideas across to them. I can't imagine how he'll do it, but he's clever in a dozen different ways, a true desert merchant, and somehow he'll offer them something that will make it worthwhile for them to give up their old beliefs and accept his. Allah and no one else will be the god of this place, is what I expect, by the time Mahmud has finished his holy work.

I need to ponder all this very carefully. You don't come upon a man with Mahmud's kind of innate personal magnetism very often. I am haunted by the strength of it, awed by the recollection of how, for the moment, he had managed to win my allegiance to that One God of his. Is there, I wonder, some way that I can turn Mahmud's great power to sway men's minds to the service of the Empire, by which I mean to the service of Julian II Augustus? So that, of course, I can regain Caesar's good graces and get myself redeemed out of Arabian exile.

At the moment I don't quite see it. Perhaps I could urge him to turn his countrymen against the growing ascendancy of the Greeks in this part of the world, or some such thing. But this week I have plenty of time to think on it, for no company is available to me just now except my own. Mahmud, who travels frequently through the area on business, has gone off to one of the coastal villages to investigate some new mercantile venture. Nicomedes also is away, down into Arabia Felix, where he and his fellow Greeks no doubt are conniving covertly to raise the price of carnelians or aloe-wood or some other commodity currently in great demand at Roma.

So I am alone here but for my servants, a dull lot with whom I can have no hope of companionship. I toyed with the idea of buying myself a lively slave-boy in the bazaar to keep me company of a more interesting kind, but Mahmud, who is so fiery in his piety, might suspect what I had in mind, and I would not at this time want to risk a breach with Mahmud. The idea of such a purchase is very tempting, though.

I think longingly all the time of the court, the festivities at the royal palace, the theater and the games, all that I am missing. Fuscus Salinator:

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what is he up to? Voconius Rufus? Spurinna? Allifanus? And what of Emperor Julian himself, he who was my friend, almost my brother, until he turned on me and condemned me to languish like this amidst the sands of Arabia? What times we had together, he and I, until my fall from grace!

And — fear not — I think constantly of you, of course, Horatius. I wonder who you spend your nights with now. Male or female, is it? Lupercus Hector? Little Pomponia Mamiliana, perhaps? Or even the cupboy from Britannia, whom surely the Emperor no longer would have wanted after I had sullied him. Well, you do not sleep alone, of that much I'm certain.

What, I wonder, would my new friend Mahmud think of our court and its ways? He is so severe and astringent of nature. His hatred for self-indulgence of all sorts seems deep as the bone: a stark prince of the desert, this man, a true Spartan. But perhaps I give him too much credit, you say? Set him up in a villa on the slopes of the Palatine, provide him with a fine chariot and a house full of servants and a cellar of decent wine, let him splash a bit in the Emperor's perfumed pool with Julian and his giddy friends, and it may be he'll sing another tune, eh?

No. No. I doubt that very greatly. Bring Mahmud to Roma and he will rise up like a modern Cato and sweep the place clean, purging the capital of all the sins of these soft Imperial years. And when he is done with us, Horatius, we shall all be faithful adherents to the creed of Allah.

FIVE DAYS MORE of solitude went by, and by the end of it I was ready, I think, to open my veins. There has been a wind blowing here all week that bakes the brain to the verge of madness. The air seemed half composed of sand. People came and went in the streets like phantoms, all shrouded up to the eyes in white. I feared going outside.

For the past two days, though, the air has been calm again. Mahmud yesterday returned from his venture at the coast. I saw him in the main street, speaking with three or four other men. Even though he was some distance away, it was plain that Mahmud was doing nearly all the talking, and the others, caught in his spell, were reduced to mere nods and gestures of the hand. There is wizardry in this man's manner of speech. He casts

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a powerful spell. You are held; you cannot choose but listen; you find yourself believing whatever he says.

I did not feel it appropriate to approach him just then; but later in the day I sent one of my servants to his house bearing an invitation to dine with me at my villa, and we have spent some hours together this very day. It was a meeting that brought forth a host of startling revelations.

Neither of us chose to plunge back into the theological discussion of our previous conversation, and for a while we made mere idle arm's-length talk in the somewhat uneasy manner of two gentlemen of very different nations who find themselves dining in intimate circumstances and are determined to get through the meal without giving offense. Mahmud's manner was genial in a way I had not seen it before. But as the dishes of the first course were being cleared away the old intensity came back into his eyes and he said somewhat abruptly, "And tell me, my friend, how did it happen, exactly, that you came to our country in the first place?"

It would hardly have been useful to my burgeoning friendship with this man to admit that I had been banished here on account of my pederasty with Caesar's intended plaything. But — you must trust me on this — I had to tell him *something*. There is no easy way of being evasive when the burning eyes of Mahmud son of Abdallah are peering intently into your own. I could lie more readily to Caesar. Or to Jove himself.

And so, on the principle that telling part of the truth is usually more convincing than telling an outright lie, I admitted to him that my Emperor had sent me to Arabia to spy on the Greeks.

"*Your* Emperor who is not *their* Emperor, though it is all one empire."

"Exactly." Mahmud, isolated as he had been all his life from the greater world beyond Arabia's frontiers, seemed to understand the concept of the dual principate. And understood also how little real harmony there is between the two halves of the divided realm.

"And what harm is it that you think the Byzantine folk can cause your people, then?" he asked.

There was a tautness in his voice; I sensed that this was something more than an idle conversational query for him.

"Economic harm," I said. "Too much of what we import from the eastern nations passes through their hands as it is. Now they seem to be drifting down here into the middle of Arabia, where all the key trade

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routes converge. If they can establish a stranglehold on those routes, we'll be at their mercy."

He was silent for a time, digesting that. But his eyes flashed strange fire. His brain must have been awhirl with thought.

Then he leaned forward until we were almost nose to nose and said, in that low quiet voice of his that seizes your attention more emphatically than the loudest shout, "We share a common concern, then. They are our enemies too, these Greeks. I know their hearts. They mean to conquer us."

"But that's impossible! Nicomedes himself has told me that no army has ever succeeded in seizing possession of Arabia. And he says that none ever will."

"Indeed, no one can ever take us by force. But that is not what I mean. The Greeks will conquer us by slyness and cunning, if we allow it: playing their gold against our avarice, buying us inch by inch until we have sold ourselves entirely. We are a shrewd folk, but they are much shrewder, and they will bind us in silken knots, and one day we will find that we are altogether owned by Greek traders and Greek usurers and Greek shipowners. It is what the Hebrews would have done to us, if they were more numerous and more powerful; but the Greeks have an entire empire behind them. Or half an empire, at least." His face was suddenly aflame with that extraordinary animation and excitability, to the point almost of frenzy, that rose in him so easily. He clapped his hand down on mine. "But it will not be. I will not allow it, good Corbulo! I will destroy them before they can ruin us. Tell that to your Emperor, if you like: Mahmud son of Abdallah will take his stand here before the Greeks who would steal this land, and he will march on them, and he will drive them back to Byzantium."

It was a stunning moment. He had told me on the very first day that he intended to bring Arabia under the rule of a single god and of a single invincible king; and now I knew who he expected that invincible king to be.

I was put in mind of Nicomedes' mocking words of the week before: *Consorting with madmen, are you, now, Corbulo?*

This sudden outburst of Mahmud's as we sat quietly together at my table did indeed have the pure ring of madness about it. That an obscure

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merchant of this desert land should also be a mystic and a dreamer was unusual enough; but now, as though drawing back a veil, he had revealed to me the tumultuous presence of a warrior-king within his breast as well. It was too much. Neither Alexander of Macedon nor Julius Caesar nor the Emperor Constantinus the Great had laid claim to holding so many selves within a single soul, and how could Mahmud the son of Abdallah?

A moment later he had subsided again, and all was as calm as it had been just minutes before.

There was a flask of wine on the table near my elbow, a good thick Tunisian that I had bought in the marketplace the day before. I poured myself some now to ease the thunder that Mahmud's wild speech had engendered in my forehead. He smiled and tapped the flask and said, "I have never understood the point of that stuff, do you know? It seems a waste of good grapes to make it into wine."

"Well, opinions differ on that," said I. "But who's to say who's right? Let those who like wine drink it, and the rest can leave it alone." I raised my glass to him. "This is really excellent, though. Are you sure you won't try even a sip?"

He looked at me as though I had offered him a cup of venom. He will never be a drinker, I guess, will Mahmud son of Abdallah, and so be it. Yea and verily, Horatius, it leaves that much more for the likes of thee and me.

"And how is your friend Mahmud?" asked Nicomedes the Paphlagonian, the next time he and I dined together. "Does he have you bowing down to Allah yet?"

"I am not made for bowing before gods, I think," I told him. And then, warily: "He seems a little troubled about the presence of you people down here."

"Thinks we're going to attempt a takeover, does he? He should know better than that. If Augustus and Trajan couldn't manage to invade this place successfully, why does he think a sensible monarch like Maurice Tiberius would try it?"

"Not a military invasion, Nicomedes. Commercial infiltration is what he fears."

Nicomedes looked unperturbed. "He shouldn't. I'd never try to deny to anybody, Corbulo, that we're looking to increase the quantity of

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business we do here. But why should that matter to the likes of Mahmud? We won't cut into his slice of the pie. We'll just make the pie bigger for everybody. You know the thing the Phoenicians say — 'A rising tide lifts all boats.'"

"Don't they teach rhetoric in Greek schools anymore?" I asked. "Pies? Boats? You're mixing your metaphors there, I'd say. And Arabia doesn't have any boats for the tide to raise, or any tides either, for that matter."

"You know what I mean. Tell Mahmud not to worry. Our plans for expansion of trade with Arabia will only be good for everyone involved, and that includes the merchants of Mecca. — Maybe I should have a little talk with him myself, eh? He's an excitable sort. I might be able to calm him down."

"Perhaps it would be best to leave him to me," I said.

It was in that moment, Horatius, that I saw where the true crux of the situation lay, and who the true enemy of the Empire is.

The Emperor Julian need not fret over anything that the Greeks might plan to do here. The Greek incursion into Arabia Deserta was only to be expected. Greeks are businessmen by second nature; Arabia, though it is outside the Empire, lies within the natural Eastern sphere of influence; they would have come down here sooner or later, and, well, here they are. If they intend to try to build stronger trade connections with these desert folk, we have no reason to get upset about that, nor is there the slightest thing that the West can do about it. As Nicomedes has said, the East already controls Aiguptos and Syria and Libya and a lot of other such places that produce goods we need, and we don't suffer thereby. It really is a single empire, in that sense. The Greeks won't push up prices on Eastern commodities to us for fear that we'll do the same thing to them with the tin and copper and iron and timber that flow to them out of the West.

No. The soft and citified Greeks are no menace to us. The real peril here comes from the desert prince, Mahmud son of Abdallah.

One god, he says. *One Arabian people under one king.* And he says, concerning the Greeks, *I will destroy them before they can ruin us.*

He means it. And perhaps he can do it. Nobody has ever unified these Saracens under a single man's rule before, but I think they have never had

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anyone like Mahmud among them before, either. I had a sudden vision of him, dear Horatius, as I sat there at Nicomedes's nicely laden table: Mahmud with eyes of fire and a gleaming sword held high, leading Saracen warriors northward out of Arabia into Syria Palaestina and Mesopotamia, spreading the message of the One God as he comes and driving the panicky Greeks before his oncoming hordes. The eager peasantry embracing the new creed everywhere: who can resist Mahmud's persuasive tongue, especially when it is backed by the blades of his ever more numerous followers? Onward, then, into Armenia and Cappadocia and Persia, and then there will come a swing westward as well into Aiguptos and Libya. The warriors of Allah everywhere, inflaming the souls of men with the new belief, the new love of virtue and honor. The wealth of the temples of the false gods divided among the people. Whole legions of idle parasitic priests butchered like cattle as the superstitions are put to rout. The golden statues of the nonexistent gods melted down. A new commonwealth proclaimed in the world, founded on prayer and sacred law.

Mahmud can say that he has the true god behind him. His eloquence makes you believe it. We of the Empire have only the statues of our gods, and no one of any intelligence has taken those gods seriously for hundreds of years. How can we withstand the fiery onslaught of the new faith? It will roll down upon us like the lava of Vesuvius.

"You take this much too seriously," said Nicomedes the Paphlagonian, when, much later in the evening and after too many more flasks of wine, I confided my fears to him. "Perhaps you should cover your head when you go out of doors at midday, Corbulo. The sun of Arabia is very strong, and it can do great injury to the mind."

No, Horatius. I am right and he is wrong. Once they are launched, the legions of Allah will not be checked until they have marched on through Italia and Gallia and Britannia to the far shores of the Ocean Sea, and all the world is Mahmud's.

It shall not be.

I will save the world from him, Horatius, and perhaps in so doing I will save myself.

Mecca is, of course, a sanctuary city. No man may lift his hand against another within its precincts, under pain of the most awful penalties.

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Umar the idol-maker, who served in the temple of the goddess Uzza, understood that. I came to Umar in his workshop, where he sat turning out big-breasted figurines of Uzza, who is the Venus of the Saracens, and bought from him for a handful of coppers a fine little statuette carved from black stone that I hope to show you one of these days, and then I put a gold piece of Justinian's time before him and told him what I wanted done; and his only response was to tap his finger two times against Justinian's nose. Not understanding his meaning, I merely frowned.

"This man of whom you speak is my enemy and the enemy of all who love the gods," said Umar the idol-maker, "and I would kill him for you for three copper coins if I did not have a family to support. But the work will involve me in travel, and that is expensive. It cannot be done in Mecca, you know." And he tapped the nose of Justinian a second time. This time I understood, and I laid a second gold piece beside the first one, and the idol-maker smiled.

Twelve days ago Mahmud left Mecca on one of his business trips into the lands to the east. He has not returned. He has met with some accident, I fear, in those sandy wastes, and by now the drifting dunes have probably hidden his body forever.

Umar the idol-maker appears to have disappeared also. The talk around town is that he went out into the desert to collect the black stone that he carves his idols from, and some fellow craftsman with whom he was feuding followed him to the quarry. I think you will agree with me, Horatius, that this was a wise thing to arrange. The disappearance of a well-known man like Mahmud will probably engender some inquiries that could ultimately have led in embarrassing directions, but no one except the wife of Umar will care about the vanishing of Umar the idol-maker.

All of this strikes me as highly regrettable, of course. But it was absolutely necessary.

"He's almost certainly dead by this time," Nicomedes said last night. We still dine together frequently. "How very sad, Corbulo. He was an interesting man."

"A very great one, in his way. If he had lived, I think he would have changed the world."

"I doubt that very much," said Nicomedes, in his airy, ever-skeptical Greek way. "But we'll never know, will we?"

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"We'll never know," I agreed. I raised my glass. "To Mahmud, poor devil."

"To Mahmud, yes."

And there you have the whole sad story. Go to the Emperor, Horatius. Tell him what I've done. Place it in its full context, against the grand sweep of Imperial history past and present and especially future. Speak to him of Hannibal, of Vercingetorix, of Attila, of all our great enemies of days gone by, and tell him that I have snuffed out in its earliest stages a threat to Roma far more frightening than any of those. Make him understand, if you can, the significance of my deed.

Tell him, Horatius. Tell him that I have saved all the world from conquest: that I have done for him a thing that was utterly essential to do, something which no one else at all could have achieved on his behalf, for who would have had the foresight to see the shape of things to come as I was able to see them? Tell him that.

Above all else, tell him to bring me home. I have dwelled amidst the sands of Arabia long enough. My work is done; I beg for surcease from the dreariness of the desert, the infernal heat, the loneliness of my life here. This is no place for a hero of the Empire.

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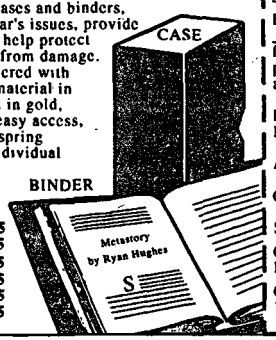

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The first story by Jonathan Carroll that we published was "Friend's Best Man" in our January 1987 issue. Mr. Carroll writes short fiction all too infrequently, focusing instead on novels like From the Teeth of Angels *and* Kissing the Beehive *when he isn't retrieving odd bits of flotsam from the Webstream. His latest book is* The Marriage of Sticks *and his uncanny new story for us concerns a government office with a low profile.*

Fish in a Barrel

By Jonathan Carroll

KROPIK WAS EATING A liverwurst sandwich when the kid came in. No more than seventeen, the boy had the obnoxious look of someone too smart for his own good. A wiseguy but no wise guy. He marched right through the open door and stopped in the middle of the nondescript office. Two windows, two large filing cabinets, two brown wastebaskets, two dented and scratched green/brown metal desks. On the wall was a photograph of the most recent President of the United States.

The boy looked slowly around, as if trying to decide whether or not to buy the place.

Kropik dabbed delicately at his small round mouth with a white paper napkin and folded it carefully into quarters before dropping it into a wastebasket next to his desk. Plus the kid had red hair. If there was one thing Kropik didn't like, it was red hair.

"I found you!"

"You certainly did."

"I cannot fucking believe it! This place is a rumor, a myth. But here I *am*, I'm actually here!"

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Kropik disliked that kind of language but refrained from protesting. Red hair and a dirty mouth. What a distressing combination. Embarrassed, he looked at his half-eaten sandwich. Liverwurst and Bermuda onion. Creating a good liverwurst sandwich was a modest feat but a satisfying one nevertheless. The secret was in knowing the correct brand of German mustard to use and the exact width of the onion slice —

"So. I made it. Now what?"

"How did you find us?"

The boy crossed his arms and smiled "I have my ways." One could almost smell his smugness wafting across the room.

"We *are* in the phone book. You only have to look us up. We're also on the Internet under governmental offices. It's just that few people bother."

That took the wind out of the boy's sails. And how *would* one define the precise color of that awful hair? More orange than red, it was the color of a carrot left in the refrigerator too long. Exactly! Dead carrot red.

"There wasn't even a name on the door or anything."

"People find us if they want to. We're a government agency. It just takes a little looking."

"*I* found you."

Always the diplomat, Kropik smiled warmly. "You certainly did."

Suddenly the boy seemed at a loss for words. People who came to this room were often speechless. Or exhausted. Angry. Hysterical. Rarely calm. In fact few calm people entered this place besides Kropik and Aoyagi. But both of them were employees so *they* didn't count.

"I don't remember my mother. She died when I was really young."

Kropik stood up and shuffled over to a filing cabinet across the room. He wore a pair of tartan wool bedroom slippers from L.L. Bean which looked enough like street shoes to pass for street shoes, or so he thought. In truth he looked like an old man shlumping around in a pair of shabby bedroom slippers. But then again, he *was* an old man and didn't pretend otherwise. Unlike his office-mate Aoyagi with his "Grecian Formula" hair dye and gold doodad charm hanging from the effeminate gold chain around his neck. Aoyagi was still trying to be a swinger, but even a word like that in Kropik's active vocabulary defined what decade he came from.

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"Don't you want to know my name?"

"We already know."

In surprise, the boy's mouth twitched open and then quickly closed. He knew where he was but still couldn't hide his shock that the old geezer knew who he was without having to ask. "I just thought — "

Already fingering through files in the cabinet, Kropik held up a hand to stop him. "Details aren't necessary. It's all known." His favorite sentence. Forty years on the job but still he never tired of saying those three words. Enjoyed seeing the look on people's faces after he said them because the reactions varied so greatly. Some swallowed like characters in a cartoon. You could see their Adam's apple swell to the size of a Ping-Pong ball and move slowly up and down. All that was needed was a balloon over their head with the word "GULP!" written in it to complete the picture. Or they looked away, acutely embarrassed to realize there were no secrets in this office. Everything was known. Remember that time in the bathroom when you thought you were alone? Or that inspired (albeit illegal) trick you pulled with your mother's will? The dubious tax return, the secret bank account, the XXX Internet addresses in Amsterdam you dialed up at midnight when you thought no one was watching? Forget it; someone *was* watching. Your worst dream just came true. And how! Those were the people who looked away. The Realizers. In a blaze of ugly trumpeting light they realized that finding this office might help in one way, but was also going to flatten them in another.

Bombs away! It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

Also Kropik knew something they didn't — having entered this office, they had to take what was there. *Had* to, like it or not. Some people tried to pull back or literally run away but there were measures to deal with that. The less said the better.

Finding the boy's file (robin's egg blue), he pulled it with a flourish out of the cabinet and returned to his desk. He sat down and centered the file in the middle. The boy craned forward to see, his curiosity making the muscles in his neck bulge. The old man gestured for him to sit in the chair facing his own. The boy didn't move.

"Come, sit down. I have everything you want right here."

Carrothead lowered himself into the chair as if sure the moment he touched down he would get a lightning bolt up his ass. All the puff-chested

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bravado of before had disappeared. Now he was only a skinny teenager with a worried look and a dry mouth.

The moment Kropik enjoyed most had arrived. Putting both hands down flat on the desk he conjured his best professional expression. "Every one of your lost memories is contained in this file. They are listed chronologically and begin the moment you were born." He paused to let that one sink in. From decades of experience he knew the best thing to do was not make eye contact. Having heard this piece of information, people's eyes invariably didn't know what to do with it. As if having suddenly been handed something burning hot, like molten lava, the terrible heat stopped their brains.

"You mean, like, I'll remember what it was like to be *born*?"

Kropik nodded. "That's right."

The boy looked at the file and his brow creased. "And every other memory I ever lost is in there? How come the file is so thin?"

"Do you work with a computer?"

"Computers suck." A dismissive sneer.

Kropik let that one pass. "Do you know what a Zip file is?"

The boy looked to see if he was joking.

Kropik spread his hands apart as if to show the size of a large fish he had caught. "On computers, you work with files. You create information and put it into separate files. Sometimes there's too much data for one, so you must condense it." He brought his hands slowly together till they touched. "There's a program that creates what are called Zip files. They allow you to crunch together a great deal of information and fit it all into one file. When you're ready, you unzip it and have everything you need." He touched the blue folder on the desk. "This is *your* Zip file. Your brain will serve to unzip what's here, if I can put it that way."

After a long silence, the boy murmured in a thin, timid voice, "I just want to remember my mother. I keep trying to remember her voice but I can't."

"This will help."

Everything in the room stopped. The two people, the noise, dust motes. Even the strong morning light waited to see what would happen next. The irony being there was no question what happened next—the kid had to open the file and face his facts. Face his music. Face the face he'd

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never seen before because he had been living behind it until this very minute.

Lamentably, Aoyagi chose that moment to enter the room eating a cheese Danish and whistling "My Sharona." To his credit, he never would have done it if he'd known what was happening. However, so few people visited the office that it was usually ninety-nine percent safe to assume no one would be there.

Be that as it may, the moment went up in smoke. Right the hell up!

"Sorry! I didn't know we had a visitor."

Always the professional, Kropik hid his anger behind the mask of an impassive face. "I was just telling him about his file before handing it over."

Aoyagi's eyes flicked back and forth between the old man and the boy. He knew what was about to happen and was checking the temperature between the two to see how things were proceeding. Unlike his priggish, self-satisfied colleague, Aoyagi did not enjoy this job. He enjoyed Icelandic women and Japanese literature but could not bring those things into *this* office. He could only bring himself from nine to four, five stupefying days a week. Always waiting for the hapless few, like this poor chumpy kid, to come in with their hopes sky high and their guards down. All of them naively certain they would discover in lost memories what was missing from their lives. Instead what they found was that most of those memories were a writhe of poisonous snakes set to strike. No one got out of this office alive. And the older Aoyagi got, the more he came to realize that applied to Kropik and himself as well.

"What's your name, son?" he asked.

Surprised by the question, the boy looked at him. "Milton Kropik."

The red hair struck Aoyagi more than anything else did. He looked at the boy's strange hair and then immediately at the old man. Old Kropik had no hair. According to him, he had been shaving his head since he was twenty-five. Red hair, no hair. All Aoyagi could focus on was that difference. Not the fact the boy had exactly the same name as his tiresome colleague. Not the fact that there probably wasn't another person on earth who owned such a lousy name. No, all Aoyagi could think about was one had hair and the other didn't.

But old Kropik didn't appear affected by this staggering coincidence.

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He had picked up a perfectly sharpened yellow pencil and was softly tapping its pink eraser end on his desk — one of the many signs he was irritated. He was staring at Aoyagi with his patented "Can we move forward?" look. Kropik and his looks. Kropik and his *life.*

Once again Aoyagi realized how much he disliked his coworker. Disliked him and his abstemiousness, his orderly life, his oh-so carefully wrapped sandwiches. Disliked Kropik's opinions on everything (even when he agreed with them), disliked his safe, never more than all right, no-risk days, no-risk anything. The pressed slacks, the nest egg of safe investments, the professional (dead) smile when in truth the only smile he had in his heart was for order. Because Kropik was nothing else *but* order — alphabetized and color-coded. Aoyagi was sure if they cut the other's heart open they would find brown file cabinets and bar codes inside instead of blood and muscle.

In this miserable room where people came to try and undo the tight knot of their failed lives via lost memories, Kropik was content pulling files and handing them over. With never so much as a grunt or a lifted eyebrow when he saw these sad sacks one and all melt into jelly when they were confronted by the full ugly magnitude of their lives in Cinerama, Dolby surround, eight-track twelve-track give the dog a bone....

At least he could have been a sadist. If only Kropik had gotten a sick kick out of seeing these people laid flat time after time after time. But not even that. He would hand over a file, watch the person implode and then offer them exactly one pale yellow (always yellow, never any other color) tissue out of a box he kept in the upper right hand drawer of his desk. Aoyagi often peeked in those drawers when Kropik was out of the office to see if anything was amiss, had changed, moved, was different. Never. Never once was a thing out of place. The eternally fixed longitude and latitude of his scissors, paper clips, rubber bands. Everything exactly where it should be and *always* was.

Yet how could that be when day after day the man's job was to toss bombs into people's lives and be there to see them explode? How could he never be touched, affected, worn down by the years of this terrible job? Where was his soul?

Aoyagi often wept. He would tramp disconsolately home from a bar, a movie, or a park bench, and sitting alone in his apartment, weep. He'd

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had a wife, a dog, a cat. All gone. None of them had cared what he did for a living so long as he brought home a paycheck. His wife left, the dog died, the cat jumped over the moon for all he knew. But that was okay because he didn't miss them. Over the years this job had stripped him bare. The only things he seemed to have left were a desire to read, look at tall blond women and hope that whatever life he had left would be better in eleven years when his retirement began. Nevertheless *he* still had enough compassion left to carry a truckful of sadness inside his soul for the people who came to this office hoping for redemption, a small miracle, at the very least a way home. Weirdly enough, he knew he wept sometimes because he missed these doomed strangers. Whoever came here was an optimist, a never-say-die who believed redemption was still possible. Aoyagi missed them because he missed that wonderful quality in himself and knew it was gone forever. He had given up hope decades ago on realizing he would never leave this job. He hadn't had the strength or the necessary stuff to walk away while his courage still had a heartbeat and the horizon wasn't an inch away from his nose.

"Okay. I'll look at that folder now."

Aoyagi's self-pitying reverie was broken by the boy's voice. His hand was out, palm up, waiting to be handed the blue file on the desk. Kropik asking Kropik. Pass Milton the file, Milton.

The only sign of the old man getting ready was a stiffening of his spine and a ceremoniousness in the way he pressed his hands together, cleared his throat. Pompous old ass. Just give the kid the bad news and run for cover. That was always what Aoyagi wanted to do, but that wasn't allowed.

"Here you are."

The boy took the folder and flipped it open. From years of experience, Aoyagi knew it took about ten seconds for the enormity of the first memory to hit and then the emotional fallout would show.

"And how was your lunch?"

Fucking Kropik! What a time to ask that question! He was cold. One cold heartless bastard.

"Fine." Aoyagi retorted, not looking at him, trying to brush him off with the word, the ugly tone with which he said it.

"And did you end up having the meatloaf?"

Lunch? Meatloaf? How could he ask such stupid irrelevant things

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when this kid was about to go nuclear? Brute. A weird word, a stiff antique word, but it was the one that flew into Aoyagi's mind. Was the guy still human? If so, he was a brute.

Aoyagi glanced at Kropik a moment and in that instant he missed everything. As the two bureaucrats looked at each other, the boy's eyes scanned down the list he had been handed. His expression never changed — not even when his eyes reached the bottom of the paper. If either man had seen that they would have snapped back like they'd been punched. But they were deep into a stare and their expressions were almost identical: dislike, disdain, and disrespect that went back forever and into every nook and cranny of their decades spent together in this office.

"What is this shit?" The boy held out the single sheet of paper and waved it up and down. "I don't know any of this stuff." His voice was accusation and question in one.

Now they looked at him and the men were more confused than at any other time on this job. Kropik had made a mistake? Turned over a wrong file? Impossible! And to his namesake, no less! Once his initial astonishment passed, Aoyagi could barely contain his glee. This was one big boo-boo! Their superiors would know about it before the day was over and Kropik's ass would be toast.

As if to rub in the mistake, the kid looked at the paper and said in a loud whine, "I don't know anyone named Andrea Harmon. And I've never been to Crane's View, New York. Is this some kind of joke? What about my mother? You said I would remember what she was like!"

He was looking at Aoyagi and vice versa. Neither saw the change on old Kropik's face when he heard the names. His mouth opened and closed as if he were about to start chewing but decided not to. When words failed, he did something he never ever would have, should have, could have done in any other situation: he reached across his desk and yanked the file out of the boy's hand. Snatched it right away.

Aoyagi gasped. The boy stood up and pointed an angry finger at Kropik. "What the hell's going on here?"

Aoyagi stepped forward and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder to calm him. He didn't know what else to do. Something big and mysterious was happening here but he was dumbfounded. His colleague had always been as dull and habitual as a hundred-year-old Galapagos turtle.

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Old Kropik ignored them both as he concentrated on the paper. Seconds later his mouth began moving again, and this time it went so fast that he looked like a chewing hamster.

The boy saw it first and laughed. "Your friend's going freako!"

Eyes on the page, Kropik slapped a palm against his broad forehead and began rubbing it furiously back and forth, back and forth. Was it a nervous breakdown? Had he gone mad?

"Andrea!" he shouted. "You should have told me! If only I'd — " When his voice disappeared, his chin began quivering again.

"So where's my file? Huh? And what's his fucking problem?"

What was Aoyagi supposed to do? The kid was the job, Kropik was his colleague. He didn't care about either of them, but cowardice saved him. Cowardice and nothing else. Kropik would retire soon — maybe even today, from the looks of things. But if the kid weren't served, Aoyagi would be in trouble. Word would get out. He'd be summoned upstairs. Anyway Kropik seemed all right — he was just having a little fit but nothing deadly or anything. After one last look at his head-slapping, eye-bulging, chin-shivering co-worker, Aoyagi went to a file cabinet and slid open a drawer.

Earlier Kropik told the boy he didn't need his name because everything was known. But he didn't explain what he meant by that. As an employee of this office, when a customer arrived, you opened any file cabinet drawer in the room. Without knowing the name or anything about the person, *whatever* file you pulled was the correct one. This mysterious process had deeply frightened Aoyagi when he'd first begun work years ago, but like everything else he grew used to it. Open a drawer, let your hand fall on a file — Bingo. Simple as that. My hand on your secret history.

So while old Kropik continued to frown, grunt and burble to himself, Aoyagi went to a different cabinet and opened a drawer. But when he reached in for a file something went wrong. For the first time in his long career, something stopped him from touching anything. Something very strong and final. You can't come in here, it said. Period.

"You can't go in there." The boy said behind him.

Empty-headed, empty of anything after the shocks of the last few minutes, Aoyagi simply turned and looked at the boy. "Why?"

"Because he already has my file in his hand. It's the correct one."

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They both looked at old Kropik who was crying now — huge fat tears streamed down his cheeks.

There was no expression on the boy's face, nothing in his facial cast — no pity, curiosity, not even derision when he said, "He saw the color of my hair. He heard my name. You'd think those would tell him."

Aoyagi remembered something. Once he was in the men's room next to Kropik as they did their standing business together at the urinals. For some reason he had unthinkingly looked down at Kropik's dick when he was finished and shaking himself off. The other man had absolutely carrot-colored pubic hair. Aoyagi had never seen such colorful pubic hair on anyone. It was one of the only interesting things he had ever discovered about Kropik but he sure as hell never mentioned it.

Now like a hammer blow, the memory of that color came back when he heard the boy calmly say, "He still doesn't know it's me. Look at him!"

Old Kropik was talking to the paper. His eyes pleaded, his lips said words with many syllables. He was asking for forgiveness, he was trying to convince. Who knows what he was saying but he was certainly enthusiastic.

Aoyagi didn't want to say it but did. "You're him, aren't you? And he's looking at his *own* memories."

The boy nodded, pleased to be recognized. "Finally someone here gets it."

"But Jules had no CHOICE, Mother!" Old Kropik shouted to a long-dead woman who had never liked him very much, truth be told.

"How could it happen? How could you not know yourself?" Aoyagi said it more to himself than to the boy.

"He's been here too long. He forgot what it's like to be human, doing this job. That's why they sent me. It's his last day."

A good deal of Aoyagi's carefully dyed hair stood up. "That's how it ends? That's what'll happen to me? They'll send ME down here to get me?"

The kid shrugged. "Could be. When you were little, didn't you always want to know what you'd be when you got older? So maybe when you grow up you're not supposed to forget that little kid. Isn't that what this job is all about anyway? Remembering what it was like?"

Aoyagi was able to stand long enough to see the boy lead old Kropik

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out of the room. He had watched so many human wrecks leave here. One day it would be him, led by a younger him he wouldn't even recognize when he entered the room. This room, this office where people came to reclaim what they thought they had lost, but which had only been waiting for the right moment to get them. Get them good.

It wasn't until many, many *years later that Frank's co-workers began to take his suicide threats seriously.*

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

The History of Snivelization

Ed Ferman
143 Cream Hill Road
West Cornwall, CT 06796

April 1, 1999

Dear Gordon,

Recently I was clearing the detritus of years out of one of my six untenanted stables here, in preparation for receiving my newly purchased herd of Mongolian Steppe Ponies. The musty old building contained a lot of boxed miscellaneous materials connected with The Magazine, and I probably spent as much time rummaging through heaps of correspondence and piles of old contracts (the unique clauses Harlan inserted into several of his were most entertaining, including the codicil that obligated *F&SF* to release a ton of jellybeans at the 1966 Worldcon if "Repent, Harlequin..." won the Hugo — even though the story had been published in *Galaxy!)* as I did supervising hordes of forelock-tugging Cornwallian handymen as they scrubbed stalls and laid in Italian-tile oat-troughs. Only frequent deliveries by Audrey of champagne and caviar snacks kept my energies up for the task.

Surely the most interesting item I discovered during this nostalgia-provoking chore was "The Smith File," and I've enclosed it with this letter, since traditionally "The Smith File" has become the property of every *F&SF* editor since The Magazine began. (Upon my stepping down from the editorship of The Magazine in June of 1991, I could not at all lay my forgetful hands upon "The Smith File," which is why Kris R. never saw it. Just as well, for its contents might have been too strong for her trusting sensibilities.)

I well recall my own acceptance of "The Smith File" from Avram Davidson when he reluctantly relinquished the editorship. (He in turn had of course received it

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from Bob Mills, who for his part had taken it from the hands of Tony Boucher. My dad, Joseph, being editor for a year between me and Avram should have been the custodian for that interval, but because of the circumstances I'm about to relate, Dad never fulfilled that role.)

Avram was living in La Gordita, Belize, at the time of his stepping-down, and I had to make a special trip there in 1965 to retrieve "The Smith File," a trip my father was unwilling to venture on. Wisely so, as events proved. I nearly lost my life several times in the hideous jungle as I made my way (with the help of only several dozen porters and guides equipped with the best Abercrombie & Fitch could provide) to Avram's palm-roofed shack, there to encounter the fever-wracked, hallucinating Davidson who could not resist muttering, as the folder slipped from his weak fingers, "The horror, the horror..."

In any case, here's a little background on the contents of "The Smith File."

When *F&SF* began publication in the Fall of 1949, The Magazine was of course immediately deluged with submissions from all the famous professionals of the time. One of those would-be contributors was none other than Edward Elmer "Doc" Smith, Ph.D. Of course, Smith's antiquated type of story represented exactly the opposite of what Boucher and Mick McComas intended to publish, and all of Smith's first trunk-cleaning manuscripts sent over the first couple of years were quickly rejected. In no way daunted, Smith began to write fresh stories, all slanted toward this prestigious new market. Every time *F&SF* printed a praise-garnering story, Smith would swiftly attempt to capitalize on the other author's ground-breaking work, with consistently ludicrous results. So wildly awful were these submissions that Boucher took to photostatting and saving them in a special folder. Thus was "The Smith File" born, and all during the fifties it fattened.

Then in 1960 came Smith's bitchy, semi-public comment in issue No. 134 of *The Proceedings of the Institute for Twenty-First Century Studies*, Ted Cogswell's famous fanzine aimed at his professional peers: "*F&SF* does not publish what I call science fiction at all." (I don't expect a young gentleman like yourself, Gordon, to be familiar with this ancient history, but you can check page 77 of the Advent reprinting of *PITFCS*.) In reality, Smith's words were the ultimate

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sour-grapes jab, as he had been trying to place with The Magazine for more than a decade. Bob Mills thought Smith's comment signaled the end of Smith's zany submissions, and closed "The Smith File" with a sigh of relief. But such was not the case; Smith could not control his desire to be a part of The Magazine, and continued to deluge us with his awkward pastiches — many of them under transparent pseudonyms — right up until his death in 1965. Why, once when he heard that The Good Doctor was temporarily incapacitated from a bad case of the flu, he even dared offer us a substitute Science column! That move nearly caused Isaac to resign from First Fandom!

Entrusting this folder to you, Gordon, I caution you never to let its contents become public — not so much as excerpts! Even at this late date, if the field learned how one of its most revered writers spent his final fifteen years, it might rock the very foundations of the genre!

Yours in leisure,
(Signed)
Ed Ferman

"The Gnurrs Come from Eddore Out"
by
Reginald "Doc" Bretnor, Ph.D.
(1950)

When Papa Seatonhorn heard about the war with Bobovia, he bought a box-lunch, wrapped his secret weapon in brown paper, and took the first bus straight to Washington. What the old Karfedix carried, straight to the Secret Weapons Bureau, was an Osnomian beam projector powered by the instantaneous release of kilowatt-hours of energy derived from immense copper bars driven nearly to the point of disruption by subatomic force generators....

"Of Time and Tellus, Third Planet of Sol"
by
E. E. Bester, Ph.D. (1951)

What Macy hated about the man was the fact that he squeaked. With an irresistible and impetuous lunge, Macy ripped the lifelike India rubber mask from the squeaking man's face, revealing — an Overlord from the Hell-Hole of Space!

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"Quit Zoomin' Those Mile-long Battlecruisers Through the Air"
by
Elmer Finney, Ph.D. (1952)

Hey, quit zoomin' your *hands* through the air, boy — I know you was a crewmember on the *Skylark of Valeron!* You flew *good* against Blackie DuQuesne, 'course you did....

"Three Hearts and Three Arisians"
by
Poul Smith, Ph.D. (1953)

By chance, I happened to be working for the outfit which hired Holger Carlsen on his graduation, and got to know him quite well in the year or two that followed. Right off, I could tell he'd make a swell Lensman....

"My Boyfriend's Name Is Boskone"
by
Avram Smith, Ph.D. (1954)

Fashion, nothing but fashion. Virus X, latest insidious plague unleashed by the cowardly Boskonians, had not even half-run its course of ravaging Rigel Four when Virgil Samms arrived....

"Call Me from the Valley of Nucleonics"
by
Manly E. E. Wellman, Ph.D.
(1954)

...The storekeeper hung a lantern to the porch rafters as it got dark.... "Friend," he said to me, "did I ask your name?"

"Neal Cloud," I named myself, and added, "I'm here to blast your vortex."

"The [Widget], the [Wadget] and Worsel"
by
Edward E. Sturgeon, Ph.D. (1955)

Throughout the continuum as we know it (and a good deal more, as we don't know it) there are cultures that fly and cultures that swim.... And then there are those cultures that breed scaly yet lovable creatures like Worsel the Velantian....

"Second Stage Tweener"
by
Leigh "Doctoress" Brackett,
Lady Ph.D. (1955)

A taxicab turned the corner and came slowly down the street.

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"Here he is!" shrieked the Children of the Lens. "Uncle Kimball!"

"Wilderness of Interpenetrating Galaxies"
by
Zenna Smith, Ph.D. (1957)

..."What canyon?" I asked.

"The canyon where The People live now — my People. The canyon where they located after the shields of their starship, the Z9M9Z, were overwhelmed in incandescent coruscating waves of offensive power and their multi-million-plugged boards were blown!"

"MS. Found in an Nth-Space Fortune Cookie"
by
E. E. Kornbluth, Ph.D. (1957)

They say I am mad, but I am not mad — angry, sure, but not mad! Damn it, I've written and sold two million words of fiction, and not a single one has placed at this big-headed, fancy-pants, not-even-a-real-pulp, New-York-literary-type digest! And it's dollars to doughnuts (and I know my doughnuts!) that they won't take this one either, even though I've tarted it up like an Aldebaranian hell-cat!

"Flowers for Lensmen"
by
"Doc" Edward Daniel Elmer Keyes, Ph.D. (1959)

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Doctor Smith says I should rite down what I think and remembir and evrey thing that happens to me from now on while I am still suffrin from the stuperfying ray of the Fenachrone....

"The Quest for Saint Kinnison"
by
E. Elmer Boucher, Ph.D. (1959)

The Bishop of Rome, the head of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Vicar of Christ on Earth — in short, the Pope — brushed a cockroach from the filth-encrusted wooden table, took another sip of the raw red wine, and resumed his discourse.

Every word the Pope uttered was picked up by Eddorian spy rays from light-years away....

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"Rogue Moon of Radelix"
by
Algis Smith, Ph.D. (1960)

Late on a day in 1959, Edward Hawks, Doctor of Science, cradled his long jaw in his outsized hands and hunched forward with his sharp elbows on his desk.

His own wife, a thionite-sniffer! And all because of him! What a zwilnik he was!

"Science: Secrets of the Kettle"
by
Isaac Smithimov, Ph.D. (1963)

In 1915, when I was working for the Bureau of Standards, helping to establish tolerance standards for the weight of commercially sold butter, I often pondered the mysteries of efficient packing moduli. But the mathematical rigors of this field were beyond me until I obtained my doctorate. Then, in 1936, while employed by Dawn Doughnuts in Jackson, Michigan, I was splattered by some hot oil from a sizzling batch of Boston Kremes. The ensuing hospital stay allowed me to focus my mind on this never-forgotten riddle, and I soon was the proud papa of Patent No. 17349128, which detailed the famous "Thirteenth Doughnut in a Dozen Box" algorithm....

"Cantata 140 to the Tenth Power"
by
E. E. K. Dick, Ph.D. (1964)

The young couple, black-haired, dark-skinned, probably Mexican or Puerto Rican, stood nervously in front of the Arisians, and the boy, the husband, said in a low voice, "Sir, we want to become Lensmen."

"The Lonely Overworld"
by
E. E. Vance, Ph.D. (1965)

On the heights above the river Xzan, at the site of certain ancient ruins, Smithcounu the Beloved Pulpster had built a manse stocked with fiction to his private taste: an eccentric structure housing gee-whiz heroics, interstellar battles, instant paradigm-shattering inventions, and sensawunda. But lately, despite all his spells, he could never entice anyone to visit....

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Poul Anderson's story "Interloper" appeared in our sixth issue back in April of 1951 and he has gone on to provide us with plenty more stories, including gems like "Goat Song," "The Queen of Air and Darkness," "No Truce with Kings," and a short novel called Three Hearts and Three Lions *(or was "Arisians" in the title of that one?). His most recent novel,* Operation Luna, *is a sequel to the "Operation" stories (Afreet, Salamander, Incubus, and Changeling) that were assembled into novel form in the early 1970s. This new tale explores a theme of great interest to Philip K. Dick and Salvador Dalí scholars: the sibling lost in youth.*

The Shrine for Lost Children

By Poul Anderson

Kamakura

SHE HAD SEEN HIM A hundred times or more — who has not? — in travel books, on postcards, as a miniature copy in San Francisco's Japanese Tea Garden. But when he sat before her, seeming to fill half the sky with the mightiness of his peace, she knew that she had never known him.

Her days of fine weather had turned cold, with a sharp little wind. The Great Buddha loomed green-bronze against a gray overcast. Maybe that helped the feeling to well up in her that nothing else mattered, not the low buildings and autumnal trees around nor the other visitors chattering and photographing nor even her own life. Or rather, said a bewildered thought, everything mattered equally, everything was the same, for Amida was in all that was.

From more than six tall man-heights he looked outward and slightly downward, as he had done for more than seven centuries. The smile of

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compassion barely touched the serenity of his face. His robes flowed to hands lying curled on his lap, the attitude of meditation, as if so bared to the truth that they had no need to grip it, so strong that they would not ever need to wield their power.

She was not religious — had not been unless as a small girl, sometimes in the dark crying out to Jesus. She only stayed for a while that she did not measure, drawing a kind of silence around herself, gazing, half lost in the presence.

She had seen much beauty thus far, and much charm, and something of a foreign history and the soul within it. Too much too fast, really; it blurred together in her mind. A few things stood clearly forth — the Temple of the Golden Pavilion mirrored in still water; children taken in bright traditional clothes to their festival at Sumiyoshi Taisha; the Sengakuji like an island in Tokyo's sea of cars and high-rises, forever remembering the Forty-Seven Ronin and their stark story. The image here had immediately joined the foremost.

Are you feeling what I feel, Jenny? she wondered. Have you been sharing the journey? Has it helped you a little bit?

She did not know whether she feared or hoped for an answer. There had been nothing since that last day and night before she left home.

Berkeley

It happened without warning, as it often did. They were taking a coffee break in the office, and Alice Holt mentioned acquiring a kitten. "I think we'll call her Jennyanydots."

Here I am. What can we do?

She lurched at the suddenness of it. The Styrofoam cup almost dropped from her hand. Some of the coffee splashed down onto the floor.

No, Jenny! Not here. Later.

But you called. I heard.

That wasn't me. We can't do anything here. Wait for me.

You're always waiting for me, she thought.

But I'm lonesome.

I know. Frantically: Be good and wait. We'll do things later, I promise.

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I'll sing you songs, I'll tell you a wonderful story, but I can't right now where I am.

This isn't a nice place?

It is, it is. It's just different from home. We both have to wait a while. I'll call you as soon as I can. I promise. Please.

A hand closed on her arm. "Are you all right?" asked Joe Bowers.

"Yes," she whispered. "Something surprised me, that's all. I'll clean up the mess."

"No, I think you better sit down," said Alice. "We'll take care of it. Don't worry, dear."

Their looks followed her as she — "groped" was the word — to her desk, fell into the chair, and drew long, slow breaths. Vaguely, she sensed their attention still upon her. She could well imagine their thoughts. This wasn't the first time, in the few months of her employment, they'd seen her stare at what seemed to them to be nothing. Or else she'd shiver or gasp. Usually it was not when Jenny stirred, simply when memories broke in on her. But of course they didn't know.

You aren't happy.

Later, I told you! she yelled.

She felt the puzzled hurt. Blindly, fleeingly, she attacked her work.

Mr. Robertson came by. He stood for a while looking over her shoulder at the computer screen and down at the papers and printouts. Then he told her to come into his own office. After closing the door, he said, "I'm afraid we'll have to let you go." He sounded more grim than regretful. "You've messed up the accounting again."

She mumbled an apology but didn't ask for another chance. If she'd done that, the tears would probably have started, and in the past several years she'd tried hard to school herself out of crying.

"Frankly, I believe you need help," he said, relief gentling his tone. "Counseling, maybe therapy. Take care of yourself. We'll mail you your pay and severance with a little extra."

The knowledge came to her: "Thank you, but I won't be at the same address. Could you direct-deposit it in my bank, please? I'll leave the account number on my desk. Thank you. Good-bye."

She didn't tell her workmates why she left early. They doubtless guessed. Outside, the loveliness of Indian summer in the Bay Area,

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sycamores in the park across the street showing their first gold to a mild sun, barely touched her awareness. It was the same when a city bus set her off in the flatlands and she walked between drab walls to the apartment.

Dave sprawled on the couch amidst general messiness, scribbling one of the poems he read aloud in coffeehouses. He scowled at the interruption. When she told him she'd been fired he exclaimed, "How long have you ever kept any job?"

"How long have you?" she replied wearily.

He rose and came to her. His smile flashed as smoothly as his voice flowed. "Hey, don't get mad, lover. I know you've got problems. I wish you'd tell me what they are, but anyway, I understand." He took her by the shoulders. His hands might as well have been two beanbags. "Let's crack a beer and smoke a joint and hit the good old futon, okay? Then you won't toss around and moan tonight, will you?"

At least I fake my responses well, she thought.

"You take this pretty easily, don't you?" she said.

"Well, it's not a disaster, is it? We've got a nice cash stash to see us through."

She met his eyes. "We?"

His hands dropped. "Uh, you do. Your divorce settlement, I mean. About fifteen thousand bucks, right?"

"That's what's left. I don't intend to waste any more of it."

He took a step backward. "Huh? What do you mean, waste? We need to eat and pay the rent, don't we?"

She sighed. "Find yourself a job. Or another woman."

He gaped.

"Don't worry," she said. "You will soon enough."

Why had she ever come to California? And why did she take up with this guy? Hoping for — for what, anyway?

Oh, he was handsome, beguiling, not a dullard. She felt a brief, frozen pity for him as well as that other. "I'll pack my things and clear out," she told him.

"Just like *that*?"

No, she thought. The decision had come all at once, but it had been building up inside her. Maybe throughout her life.

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"Where'll you go?" she heard.

To a motel, she supposed, one with a restaurant and a bar close by, though she'd better not have more than a couple of drinks after forcing down some food. Then in her room she'd do what she had promised Jenny, reach a truce of sorts with herself, and at last be able to sleep.

"Don't worry," she repeated. "And I'm not angry with you, Dave. We've squabbled, but we've also enjoyed ourselves. Be happy."

She did not think: If only I could be. Endurance was the one defense left to her.

Kamakura

Maybe she had him to thank for getting her interested in Japan. He talked such a lot about Zen. But no. Already before she set off, the reading she did and her conversations with people who were informed had shown how scant his knowledge was, how close to zero his understanding. Zen was a set of attitudes and practices; it had scarcely anything to do with what was in this temple.

Nor did she.

She clutched her purse as if it were the peace that was fading out of her and walked hastily around the courtyard.

A mistake. Seen from behind, Daibutsu was almost featureless, a metal mass. A booth at the side gave access, for a fee, to the interior. Obviously no worshipper considered the idea sacrilegious — it must be like an American's attitude at the Statue of Liberty — but she didn't want to enter. What she saw might well wreck her memory of the mood she had lost.

Better go. She glanced at her watch. Yes. She also meant to see the other temple, Hase-dera, before returning to her lodgings. According to the guidebook, at this time of year it closed at five, and the afternoon was wearing on.

Or should she make the visit? That shrine —

Well, she could pass by it and head straight for the famous things. Roy wasn't here to call her a neurotic coward. Nobody was.

She went from the Great Buddha, never looking back.

* * *

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Phoenix

Summer laid even an extravagantly well-watered suburb in a furnace. The window out which she stared seemed an ice-fragile barrier. It would shatter if she touched it, and her conditioned air spill forth to be devoured by the heat-shimmers on the pavement. No. Ridiculous. This moment in time was the glass that was breaking apart. Her gaze went between a pair of neighbor houses, to the desert beyond.

"I loved you. I did. Once," Roy said.

Or you loved the girl who tumbled from junior college into marriage four years ago because a man asked her, she thought. If I could have changed —

He'd said essentially the same thing earlier this afternoon, when the words had been harder. If she'd pull herself together and overcome her moodiness, her sloppiness, yes, her frigidity. If she'd simply put on enough of a mask that they could have a decent social life. That was important for business too. The business was going to hell. He couldn't concentrate on it, the way things were. And lately he'd found another woman. Inevitably, he'd said.

"Don't be afraid," he went on. "We needn't spend a fortune on lawyers. I'll give you the best settlement I can afford,"

She turned around to confront him again. Having foreseen this day and braced herself for it, she was able to reply, "Enough to put me on my feet. No more. I won't parasitize you...and her."

It hurt unexpectedly much to see his astonishment. "By God, you do have guts."

"I've needed them. You don't believe that, but it's true."

"To fight yourself. Why? I've pleaded with you, never mind expense, see a psychiatrist. Get rid of those demons, whatever they are." He paused. "Or — okay, we're not Catholic, but at last I wondered, I'm still wondering, maybe an exorcist — "

"No!" she cried, less at him than at the horror.

Getting rid — if it could be done at all — of the final, unbearable guilt.

He slumped where he stood. "Well, we've been over this ground and over it, haven't we?" he said dully. "Too late now in any case. But I'll always wish you the best."

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A civilized lie, she thought. Not that you'll wish me the worst. You'll simply be too free and happy to care one way or another. "The same to you," she said.

"Too bad things didn't work out. But—" He straightened. "Well, they didn't. We can stay friends, can't we? How about a drink? Or we could go out to dinner. Or whatever."

She shook her head. "No, thanks. You go, Roy. Please. Till tomorrow. I'd rather be alone overnight."

"You sure?" She nodded. After a few further, embarrassed exchanges, he left. She knew where he was bound. No matter.

The westering sun began to soften a ridge on the horizon with purple and shadows.

It was a comfort, the comfort that is in surrender, when Jenny asked, *Will we go home now*? Yes, Jenny had listened, a little bewildered and scared but with unshaken faith in her.

No, she answered. Don't you remember? Mother's not there anymore.

I know. Where is she?

Poor tormented Mother. Did Jenny understand at all about death?

Resting, she answered. You and I aren't ready to. Not yet. Let's find someplace else.

Kamakura

Traffic went thick on the narrow street, cars, trucks, motorcycles crowding left-sidedly along, noise she didn't notice at the temple. Though lessening, the wind that searched through her thin coat kept the air fresh. On this gray day in November she might be the single foreigner in the Hase district. Certainly she saw none but Japanese. Most of them walked briskly but without hustle. They didn't look alien. Their clothes were Western style, except for one lady unself-consciously in a kimono. An occasional jacket or sweatshirt on a youngster flaunted some overseas name or slogan, generally American; mature men were often in business suits. Few were small — well-nourished, the past couple of generations had grown to European-like sizes — nor were their faces actually unfamiliar. By any standard, a number of the men were handsome, a remarkably high percentage of the women beautiful.

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Emptiness asked: What can I find here? Gorgeous sights, interesting places, glimpses of customs and rituals, but for me, are they anything more than museum pieces? This is a high-tech, cutting-edge, world-power country. I might have done better on a Southwestern Indian reservation. No, there they'd have nothing whatever they could share with outsiders; everything goes by kinship. Here I can at least get around as easily and safely as I could in France or Holland. Relax. Forget any pilgrimage nonsense. Be just a tourist. I'm no more an outsider than I have always been everywhere.

Still, the snatches of conversation she overheard were incomprehensible, the signs unreadable. The walk was supposed to take about ten minutes. The guidebook contained a sketchy map. But when a longer time than that had passed, she realized she'd missed a turn. She stopped, unreasonably dismayed. How helpless you felt when you had become illiterate.

She looked around and around. Could she manage to retrace her steps? Then it might not be worthwhile starting over. Already the day was noticeably darkening.

"Excuse, prease." A middle-aged woman had halted, to address her in English with a friendly smile. "You need assistance?"

"I've lost my way. If you could tell me how to get to — "

She hesitated, aware she'd mangle the pronunciation. "Hase-dera?"

"Come." The woman took her elbow. "I show you."

"No, thank you very much — ah — *arigato*. I don't want to trouble you."

"No troubre. You come, prease." The woman led her off.

"Really — I mean — weren't you headed the other way?"

"No troubre. You come from United States?"

"Yes. Near San Francisco." Her last port of call.

"Ah, Carifornia, yes? You enjoy your visit?"

The American nodded wordlessly. The Japanese accent was hard for her to follow. She'd encountered several individuals with perfect English; they got plenty of chances to practice. This lady had to make an effort, besides going in a direction that wasn't hers.

It was a short while, though, till she pointed up a lane.

"Straight there. Watch out for cars. They come srow, but you go stand on side, okay?"

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"Thank you — *arigato, arigato* — " She recalled that the proper expression involved another word or two, but couldn't bring them to mind. She bowed awkwardly. Her guide smiled again, wished her a pleasant evening, and disappeared into the crowd.

She stood for a minute harking back to earlier incidents after her arrival. You expected politeness from bellhops and waiters and such, and received it with never a hint of surliness. However, this wasn't the first time a stranger had freely come to her aid. She thought the Japanese must be not only the most courteous but the most considerate people on Earth. She almost wished she had been born as one of them.

Born — No. No, no, no.

She snapped a cold breath. She had indeed come a long way from her beginnings. Why couldn't she leave them behind?

Northfield

Spring in Minnesota was a flirt, bright and thawing, bleak and wet, then at last all-yielding. Leaves glowed newly green, blossoms sprang forth overnight. The arboretum became an enchanted forest. It was the pride of the college, forty acres of trees and shrubs, where footpaths wound and a brook lazed glittery under a wooden bridge. Fragrances and early birdsong filled the breeze. And she walked here with Tim. Tim!

The world had wobbled yesterday when he suggested it as school was closing for the weekend. They'd passed through the same grades since she and Mother moved to this town, but hardly ever spoken, and he wasn't just lately turned sixteen, half a year older than her, he was Tim, big, outgoing, popular, active in the science club and the band, a basketball whiz and surely great on the dance floor with any girl lucky enough to be his partner. For a couple of sick heartbeats she'd thought it must be some cruel joke. But no, he'd joined her offside where nobody else could hear, and his smile was almost shy. She didn't sleep much Friday night.

That made no difference. She had never been as alive as she was today. If I cut myself somehow, she thought once, wildly, I bet the blood would sparkle.

Underneath: Please don't let anything spoil this. Oh, please.

They hadn't found a lot to say, though. He'd gotten out a few words

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about having lunch later on, like at Ingrid's Sandwich Shop, and she'd stammered that her mother expected her home then and been terrified that she'd have to admit it was because she hadn't dared say anything about her date, but he made it good right away by answering, "Too bad. Some other time soon, I hope? And we could sit together in lunch hour at school if you want."

She, with him, who always sat by herself.

Otherwise they strolled under the leaves. He didn't take her hand, but once in a while his brushed hers and a tingling shot through her.

The path bent toward the stream. Near the bridge was a bench. "Care to sit down?" he asked.

They did, side by side, beneath the sky and the sun. The water clucked and murmured where it flowed around the piers.

"How nice," she managed after a while. "Extra nice right now."

He turned his head to look at her. She half looked at him. "You ought to know. You come here a lot, don't you?"

He's *noticed*? "Yes. It's, it's peaceful."

"Quiet. Like you."

She sat mute.

"You're so quiet," he said. "So alone. Why?"

"N-nobody asks me...to do anything."

"Don't blame them. You kind of scare them, you know? You often seem like your mind's off in another dimension or something, or else you've got your nose buried in a book."

Was that an attack? She stiffened. "I like books."

Books don't call me idle, careless, worthless. They don't tell me, "Jenny would never have done that."

They don't cry for help.

He sensed the change in her. "Hey, wait." The words stumbled over each other. "I didn't mean any harm. Honest. I like you. You've got brains."

The fear melted out of her. She felt the heat in her cheeks. "Thank you," she whispered, staring down at the damp earth.

He regained his usual self-assurance. "It's just there's more in life," he said earnestly. "Fun, games — Not that I'm a lightweight. I have my ambitions."

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Safe ground. Maybe. She found she could turn her eyes back toward his. "What do you want to do?"

"I think I'll go into electronics. Research and development. That's the future."

"Unless it's biology. Or psychology. They're doing big things in genetics and brain chemistry."

"You read science magazines too? Yeah, you're no airhead." He leaned closer. "I'd like to know you better. What's your dream?"

Confusion overwhelmed her. "To be happy, I guess."

My daydream. When I can dream it. At night — No, don't think about what happens some nights. Not now. Hang onto this sunlight, Tim here beside me, yonder cherry blossoms.

"You aren't?" he wondered.

"I'm all right," she insisted.

"You don't need to be lonesome." Amazed, she saw him blush too. "You — you're real pretty."

His arm went around her shoulder, ever so gently. His lips drew near hers. I'm in love, she knew amidst the uproar, in love, in love,

You're leaving me! Jenny screamed. *Don't leave me alone! It's dark here!*

Her throat gave back the cry. She wrenched free, leaped up, and ran. Through the sobs she heard Tim call out, but he didn't come after her.

Kamakura

Small open-fronted shops flanked this lane, most of them offering tourist wares, better stuff than their American counterparts. A few homes stood in fenced gardens. The buildings were old, attractive, exotic in ways she could not clearly identify. As her guide had warned, pedestrians yielded when a vehicle nosed through.

I won't have time for much, she realized. The view over the city. The Kannon Hall and its huge image. It wouldn't be right if I didn't pay my respects to the Goddess of Mercy. Not that I believe she can grant me any. But somehow, in some unreasoned way, it's something I can do for Jenny.

Or because of Jenny? I don't know. How long has it been since I last asked myself such a question? I don't even know what I came searching

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for, besides a few bright memories to take back with me. But why has Jenny been silent this whole while?

Never mind. Never.

I can come back tomorrow for the other sanctuaries and the garden. The book says they're exquisite. That'd mean changing my itinerary, but who's with me to care?

Only — then I'd have to pass twice, to and fro, by the shrine for the children. How would that be for you, Jenny?

She tensed herself against an answer. There was none.

Abruptly, impulsively, she turned into one of the shops and bought a few incense sticks and a book of matches. She could have fragrance in her hotel room tonight, and afterward at home, wherever that would next be.

Not pausing at the lower complex, she kept on till she saw the staircase rise long and steep. Below it she stopped, unsure whether she really should continue.

Yes. Every time she made herself do what a normal human being would, she gained more control. If Kamakura had nothing else to give her, it offered this slight strengthening. She began to climb. The effort made her feel, for a foolish moment, as if she were climbing out of her past.

Minneapolis

How softly the snow fell. You couldn't see across the street through that tumbling white stillness. She wished she were out in it, the air on her cheeks like a cool kiss, the flakes on her tongue tasting of sky. Mother kept the house awful hot in winter.

But she'd tried to pick Gumball up for a hug, and the kitten was beside the lamp and she'd knocked the lamp over. Its glass globe lay in shiny pieces across the rug.

Mother loomed above, as tall as the ceiling. She kept her voice cold. That meant she was angry. "You're a bad girl. Bad, do you hear?"

"I'm sorry."

"'Sorry' isn't enough. You must be *careful.*"

She hung her head. The tears began. She tried to sniffle them away.

"Don't blubber at me," Mother said. "You're four years old. High time you learned proper behavior."

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She knuckled her eyes and sort of stopped crying.

"Go to your room," Mother said. "Stay there till dinner time."

"Yes." It came out like a puppy barking.

"Show more respect, young lady."

She bit her lip. "Yes, Mother."

"Go and think about Jenny. She would have been a good child." When no reply came: "Wouldn't she?"

Real quick: "Yes, Mother."

The woman bent down and spoke more softly. "I'm not being mean to you. I'm trying to make you as good as Jenny." She sighed. "And I have to do it all by myself, now that your father has left us. I love you. I want you to love me too, love me as much as both of you together should have done. That way you'll make up for crowding Jenny out of the world. Do you see?"

She nodded and nodded and nodded.

Mother straightened. "I know you didn't do it on purpose," she said in the flat way she'd said this often before. "It hurt you too. Your sister would have been your friend, your playmate. You would have grown up sharing everything, in a loving home. Instead, you've never known her. But you can think about her. I do. That's why I gave her a name, so we will never forget her."

It was not my fault! She mustn't say that. She remembered too well what came of it when she did. But words escaped: "I won't. I know her. You never did."

Mother went pale and tight around the mouth. "That's enough. I've told you again and again not to act crazy. Don't say mean things, either." She pointed. "Go."

The corridor was high and hollow. Feet sounded loud on bare boards. This was a big house. Mother kept telling how she had wanted a big family. Now Mother wondered if they could afford to stay anywhere in the city.

The door clicked shut on the room. It was very quiet too. The light through the window and the snow fell shadowy-gray. The pictures on the walls, mostly of cute animals, seemed to lose their colors. But they had never been changed and she hardly saw them any longer. She had her toys, a large rubber ball, a tea set, crayons, paper, scissors, paste. She had her books. A teddy bear and a doll sat on top of the dresser. Between them lay

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a rattle. Mother had told her she must always keep it there, because it would have been Jenny's.

She sat down in her chair, looked out at the snow, and said into the quietness: "We're alone now,"

The sad little voice grew hopeful. *Will you play with me?*

Sure I will, she answered.

Who else was there?

Kamakura

No, of course you couldn't leave your past behind you. It was yourself.

As she climbed, her view became wide. Trees in their fall colors spread a tapestry across the hillside, subdued by the gathering dimness. The eastern sky arched slaty, the western dull silver. Lights were beginning to shine along the streets below. Southward glimmered Sagami Bay.

She reached a turn of the ascent and found the images. They were meant to welcome, but they brought her to a halt as if they barred the way. For a moment her heart stopped.

Rank upon rank, rank above rank, hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds, they lined this part of the stair, which otherwise turned upward to the left, and surrounded a landing. They were alike, doll-sized figures of a robed man, unpainted, earth hue. That made the articles of clothing on a number of them, mainly red caps or bibs, doubly vivid, even at this hour. Jizo, a boddhisatva, one of those who have attained Enlightenment but deferred entering Buddhahood that they might help lead others toward salvation — Jizo, patron of travelers and the savior of children.

This was the place she had meant to pass by, and suddenly could not.

The landing was a small strip of ground that led off to a small and simple shrine. Here the caps and bibs were closer together, and she noticed tiny offerings of food at the feet of several. Mothers came here, to bind on memorial cloths, lay down their sacrifices, light incense sticks. Mothers of babies who had been aborted, naturally or deliberately, or were stillborn.

Stillborn like my twin. Though that was a strange case, an entangling umbilicus, a thing that could not have happened at all if we had not been two.

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She felt with a faint astonishment that the thought did not hurt as it always had before. Her heart beat evenly and gently.

What stung her eyes was a nearby image wearing a cap with Mickey Mouse's face on it and a bib on which was printed I LOVE MY DADDY. She might have given that, if she had known her father. But this must be from a Japanese family. Did they have living children who liked American cartoons?

A sense of abiding strength touched her. The outside influence showed merely that here was faith held by real people in a real world.

How right that Kannon watches over this ground, she thought. I should go on and see the Merciful One before it's too late.

She couldn't.

Why not?

Jenny, do you want something? Tell me. Come to me.

There was no answer.

Mother would never let go of you. She would never let you rest. But she's gone. Why haven't you departed too? Why can't you?

An impulse rose and rose in her, like a tide. She glanced back and forth, upward and downward. Nobody else was in sight. Nobody would take offense if a foreign unbeliever made a clumsy gesture.

A gesture, no more. But she'd had the courage to come this far. It would be wrong to deny Jenny a token, which was also a sign to herself — a declaration not of bitterness, in spite of everything, but of love.

Was that the blind wish that had driven her? Then where had it come from?

Let her carry it through and be done.

She stepped off onto the landing and passed between the little statues. At the shrine she paused, uncertain. What to do? She bowed deeply, as best she was able. Jizo, Kannon, and Amida must know she meant reverence.

Fumbling in her purse, she got a coin — it felt like a hundred yen piece, which wasn't much but had flowers on it — and tossed it into an offering box. The wind had died down, and the disc landed with a sound that almost pealed. Reaching in again, she took an incense stick and the matches. She struck fire and set it in a bowl of sand where others had burned out. She breathed the sweet smoke.

For you, Jenny.

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Once more she bowed.

It was as if she heard a faraway chorus of children's voices. But the one that spoke to her was a woman's, calm and joyful.

Thank you, thank you, my sister.

Jenny, is that you?

Yes. At last at peace.

In unsurprised acceptance, she thought that Jenny hadn't foreseen either. How could a small child? But Jenny had come to know with a wordless wisdom that lies beyond life, that here was release.

Good-bye, my dearest. Peace be with you too, forever.

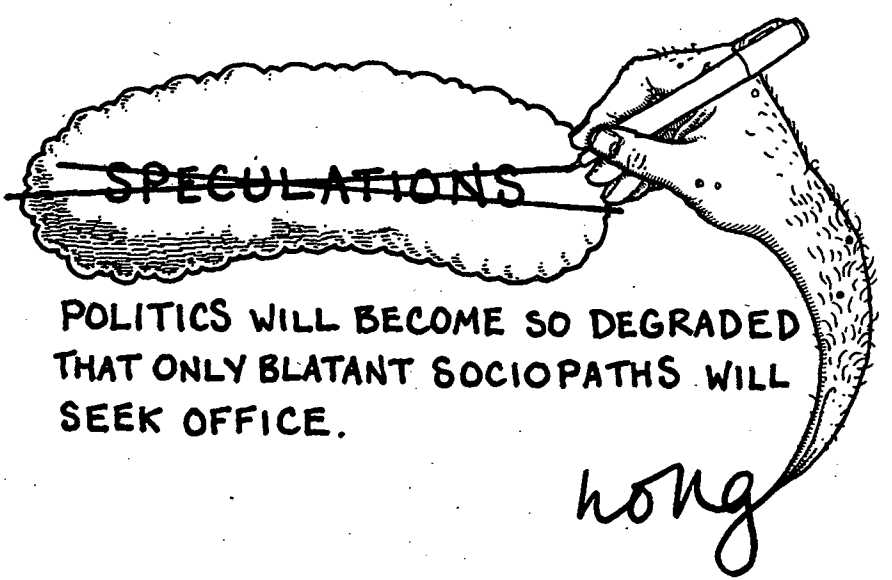
She stood alone, altogether alone, yet open to all that was. Never before now had she been happy.

I have not reached heaven, she knew. I have simply found — or been granted — enough Enlightenment that I can go home and share in the living world.

What is Enlightenment but Understanding?

It was not only Jenny who clung to me. I would not let go. Here I have freed myself from myself.

She went on upward, to Hase Kannon, to give her own thanks. ☙



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Compared with most of this issue's contributors, Howard Waldrop is a newcomer to our magazine—his first story here was "Mr. Goober's Show" last September. However, the author of Night of the Cooters *has been around a long time, as you might infer from this bit of reportage.*

The Dynasters
Vol. I
On the Downs

By Howard Waldrop

UG AND HIS FRIENDS STOOD in front of the hillock, wondering how to get the bear out of the good cave. It was getting colder, and the other cave leaked.

Meanwhile the women and children were doing something useful like finding stuff to eat.

The men looked at the cave.

"Stick holes in same time?" asked Ab.

"You *seen* thing?" asked Nu.

"No," said Ab.

Ug spread his arms wide, hairs fluttering in the cold wind. Then his son Nu jumped up on his shoulders and held his hand up as high as he could.

"*That* big?" asked Ab, and looked at the cave again.

Mo was chewing one of the last leaves. They turned to him.

"Stick fire in face," he said.

They ran around gathering up stuff.

Afterwards, he was known as Mo the Smart.

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* * *

They stood at the water's edge, in the snow, under the high white cliffs.

From the top of them you could see more land way way off, across the Big Water. Only now, where the bottoms of the cliffs used to be covered, there was much sand and rock. It went far out before the water began there.

"Bad feeling," said Ug.

"What happening?" asked Ab.

"No know," said Ug. "Will ask Mo."

On the way back to the cave, on the path, they threw their pointy sticks into one of the Big Head-horn things that was browsing in the crusted snow. It took them half the day to drag it back to the other people.

"Uh-oh," said Nunu.

She ran back to the cave as fast as she could through the thick snow, putting her feet in the holes she'd made coming out.

"Quick!" she said. "Stoop-shouldered guys big jaws coming!"

They grabbed their clubs and pointy sticks and all ran to the top of the cliffs.

Out a ways on the mud and sand ramp that divided the two parts of the Big Water, which stretched out toward the land far away you could almost see when it was clear, men were coming. They could see their big jaws this far away, and their skins flapped around them, dark in the breeze.

Mo counted.

"We more," he said.

"Get 'em," said Ug.

Afterwards, they found that the big jaws belonged to the men themselves, and admired them. They were large and were out in front of the mouth. Some of the children wobbled those of the dead ones — yaga yaga yaga. Their teeth were all different too, the front ones not as sharp.

But the skins, which had flapped and fluttered around them while they were fighting, were not theirs at all. They belonged to dead animals. They could be taken off the stoop-shouldered men.

Ug wrapped one around himself. After a while he said, "Hey! This warm!"

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They rushed to grab them.

Mo was looking at the sandy causeway.

"Next time, bring more," he said, pointing toward the far land. "They tough. Take long time die."

Ug had two skins wrapped around him. He danced.

"Hey!" he said. "What have supper?"

Nu looked for the bug crawling in the fur of his leg, found it, pinched it to pieces.

It was his time to watch from the top of the tall cliffs as he had done many many times before in his youth and early manhood. Now he had children of his own. The stoop-shouldered guys big jaws never had come back. It had gotten colder, though there had been a few golden summers in there.

He sighed, and watched, and waited, and hummed the song about the big animal with the horn in the middle of its nose.

Mo the tenth Smart sat at the edge of the cliff on a cool summer night and looked at the quarter moon. His grandson little Nu lay beside him, looking up at the summer stars and the pictures they made — the Big Thing, the other Big Thing, the Ugly Thing, the Little Boy with the Snake.

"Which that?" he asked.

"That Woman With Stick," said Mo the tenth Smart.

"Over there?"

There was a long pale light across the sky with a bright dot at the front.

"That Girl Look for Husband," said Mo. He poked little Nu in the ribs. "Maybe marry *you*. She come round long time between. Mo the fourth Smart saw; told Mo seventh Smart who saw, Mo tell me."

Little Nu rolled over and looked at the moon.

"Will Moon get eaten tonight?" he asked. It had happened when he was very little and it had scared him.

Mo pointed. "Remember words Mo fifth Smart: 'Quick bites come out Moon only full.'"

"Forget."

"Learn not forget," said Mo the tenth Smart.

He looked over at the big strip of land that went between the two

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shallow Big Waters. As usual there was just dirt and the bushes that grew there.

Little Nu propped himself up on his elbows.

"Where come from, Grandad Mo?"

"From cave," said Mo, and laughed.

"No! Where come from? All us?"

"We always here," said Mo the tenth Smart.

WEENA AND OOLA lashed together the summer hut with tendons from one of the big red deer. The breeze was warm. They were setting up the hut near the break in the cliffs where the stream came through.

Mo the many Smart stood looking at the mouth of the stream. Some of the men and boys floated on logs, sticking things in small fish, or falling off into the water beyond its mouth. There was once more Big Water all across in front of the cliffs though it was not very deep.

"Something bother?" Oola asked him.

"Yummy fish not back."

Every year big fish had shown up at the mouth of the stream, which was up the coast from where the land used to divide the Big Water. They came up in the stream. You could stick things in them, or hit them with rocks, or pick them up with your hands. They ignored you, only continuing to make eggs and sticky stuff and flopping around. They did that for most of a moon, and everybody ate and ate until they made fish puddles from their mouths.

"Next moon," said Oola.

"No," said Mo the many Smart. "Next moon when come while land *there*." He pointed. "Land not there. They come this moon when used come before land there. All Mo's know when that was. Now should come this moon."

"Me see day before day," said Oola.

"Is where?"

"There." She pointed down the coast where the Big Water curved around into the Big Big Water. "Them come. Them swim round. Then go that way." She waved her hand, indicating the Big Big Water. "Go round all land-world. Here next moon."

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"Why them do that?" asked Mo. "Them right here!"

Oola lifted her shoulders and raised her hands.

"Hmnm," said Mo the many Smart.

A moon later, in the middle of the night, they heard flopping in the creek. They all ran down there with sticks with pointy deer horns on them and clubs and rocks. For most of that moon they ate and ate and ate.

Mo the many Smart lay between two big broken chalk boulders. His stomach was stretched tight under his fur. He could barely move.

Oola walked up to him.

"Told so," she said.

"Not forget," said Mo. Then he made another fish puddle from his mouth.

After a storm, Nu the many-many ran into his hut.

"Stop dinner!" he said.

"Make leg-of-wolf roasted tubers," said A-la the many.

"Change plans," said Nu the many-many. "Blue painted guy some jaw wash up, log thing. Jabber a lot. Ug the many-many poke him, no feel ribs. Big feast coming, yum yum eatem up. Have wolf day-add-day."

"Blue paint some jaw?" asked A-la. "Not pictured up guy some jaw?"

"No. That one-back-one. This blue all over. Paint come off. White as cliff."

A-la sighed. *Men!*

Ab the many-many had troubled eyes, yellow and far-seeing.

He was on the cliff, looking toward the land you could barely make out.

He came up to look at it often. He did his work in the village on the downs, but his mind was not in it.

He came down to where the men and boys were making log-boats that would hold man-add-man for fishing.

"What there?" he asked Mo the lot Smart.

"Big Trouble," said Mo.

"How know? Every time man come we eat," said Ab the many-many.

"Goes back long way land here," said Mo. "Land come. Stoop-shouldered

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guys big jaw come. More try come before land go way. Then grandfather time pictured up guys some jaw and blue painted guys some jaw wash up. No be too careful."

"What we know them?" asked Ab.

"Them trouble," said Mo.

"*Me* find out!" said Ab, jerking his thumb toward his chest fur.

"Smart of ages, Ab," said Mo. "No look trouble. Trouble find anyway."

"Me find out," said Ab.

They had watched him build a boat-log that would hold man-add-man-add-man. It had taken him day-add-day-add-day. Then he put his pointy stick, his club, hide cloak, and food into it. Then he launched it, pushed out, lined up on the big white cliff and began to paddle hard.

They sang him the song of safe journey, Ug the lot himself beating on the big singing log. Then they went up to the top of the cliff and watched until he was lost from sight.

It was almost a moon later that one of the fishermen called them all from their huts in the village on the downs, and they went to the shore beneath the cliffs.

It was late afternoon and there was a dot on the water. It got bigger but very slowly.

"It Ab," called down the watchman from the cliffs.

He came to shore slowly. He paddled with only one arm. When he was close enough they saw one of his eyes was missing and his head was swollen up on that side. His right arm flopped at his side. He beached the log and hopped out, bracing himself with his left arm. (Some things a person has to do themselves.) His right foot was missing toe-add-toe-add-toe.

"Hello, Ab," said Mo the lot Smart.

He was looking back across the water with his good eye. "No understand, Mo," he said. "They kill each other over there *all* the time."

"*All* the time?"

"All the time. Every day."

"Come. Me fix up," said Mo.

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"Something do first," said Ab. He leaned down in the log-boat and made a big fire, and they all watched it burn.

"Mo?" asked Ab, as cinders drifted over them on the beach.

"What, Ab?"

"Mo. Me ever want go somewhere again, kill me with club."

"Can do," said Mo.

Then they led him back toward the village huts.

Then came big nosed guys some jaw, and they brought with them the Great Big Things with Long Noses and Two Big Curved Teeth. They came in big log-boats with big square hides on trees and many many paddlers.

Ug the lot-many-lot said, "Get all people up down coast, jump on them."

The big nosed guys some jaw lined up all together in one place with shiny pointy sticks all sticking out in one place. In front of them they put the Great Big Things with the Long Noses and the Two Big Curved Teeth.

"They just like old ones great-great-many-many grandfathers hunted. Only they no have hair," said Mo, the lot-many Smart.

"We know how do *them*," said Ug the lot-many-lot. "Get 'em."

The fattest big nosed guy some jaw they chose for signal honors.

They whacked up the Great Big Things with the Long Noses and the Two Big Curved Teeth, the people of the other villages carrying off as much as they could.

They found that the one-add-one-add-one big log-boats were filled with men who were fastened where they sat. They jabbered, afraid. The people broke up the things that held them down with some of the useful hard implements they found. They herded all the loosened men onto one big log-boat.

Ug the lot-many-lot made a shooing motion with his hands.

"Go way," he said. "Go way."

The men looked at him a moment. Then they began yelling and making noise and running up and down and below into the log-boat, and the big hide flopped down and they waved and yelled and ran out of sight and the paddles all started working. And the big log-boat went out of sight toward where the Big Big Water started.

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They wrapped the fattest big nosed guy some jaw with the things which had held the paddlers to the log-boats.

He jabbered, but he stood straight and tall.

Ug the lot-many-lot leaned in very close.

"Yum yum eatem up," he said.

NU THE LOT-MANY-MANY stood on the cliff, looking back over the downs and the village. He could see a herd of the red deer browsing not very far away, and further up a flock of birds drank at the mouth of the creek. He could see women gathering seeds at the weed fields, and a couple of men were out killing hares up near the boggy place.

Down in the village, the gray shapes of the old boat-logs from many-lot-great-grandfather time, which had been made into a meeting place where the people from all up and down the coast came every twelve moons to make Ug All-Boss, stood out from the other hide and mud huts. Here and there was smoke from a cooking fire. He raised his eyes and could just see smoke from the next village far up the coast.

He turned his eyes back to the Big Water, still dull in the early morning sun, and the far smudge of the land you could barely make out. It was going to be a warm fine day, and Mo the lot-lot-many Smart said it was just one more moon until the yummy fish came up the creek again, and there were signs of a mild winter.

Later he would go down, he thought, and join the boys poking sticks into the little fish that were always in the Big Water. They would have to do until the yummy fish came in.

Girl Look For Husband was in the sky. Even in the late afternoon, a swatch of white with a glowing head stretched halfway across the heavens. "She *really* looking this time," the people said.

All-Boss Ug the lot-many-lot was fixing his hut, pounding wooden pegs in with a big rock.

"Grandfather! Grandfather!" yelled little Nu the lot-many-lot, running in from the cliffs.

"Not have time everyone come in flaring sagittal crest," said Ug. "What now?"

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"Ab many-lot-lot say big logs come again. Come quick bring clubs pointy sticks."

Ug dropped the rock and began to yell everyone out of their huts and send ones running to the other villages.

All the people stood on the big white cliffs. It would have been dark had not Girl Look For Husband been blazing bright as a full Moon. Everything was a sort of silver-gray twilight.

They looked down where lot-many boat-logs were drawn up on the beach and saw (what Ab who had seen them before dark had said were) weasel-eyed guys some jaw there. Many-many-lot. They all had long pointy sticks with shiny ends and shiny flat things on their hip-clothes, and some had curvy things on their backs and bags full of little sticks.

Ug poked Mo the lot-many-many Smart.

"More them than us," said Mo.

"Not wait day," said Ug. "Go get 'em!"

Yelling and waving their clubs and pointy sticks, they charged down the hills.

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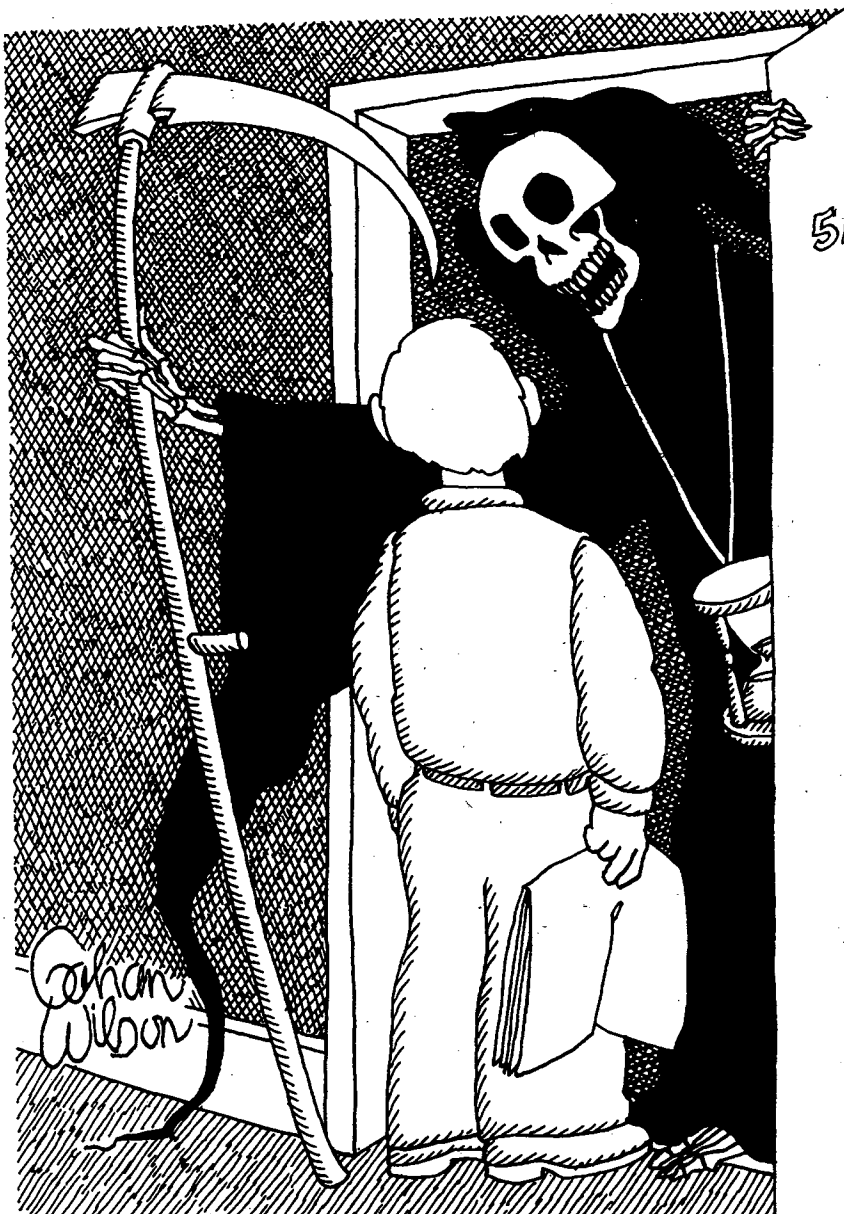

"I just wish you could see the expression on your face!"

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Robert Sheckley made his first appearance in these pages with "The Monsters" in March of 1953. His most recent story here was "Deep Blue Sleep" in June and we can look forward to more of Mr. Sheckley's unpredictable tales in times to come.

Kenny

By Robert Sheckley

KENNY AND THE REST OF The People were in the hold of the spaceship as it continued its interminable trip through space. There were about a hundred of The People lying naked together in a big tangled mass in the ship's hold. This was not due to lack of room, however: the hold was immense. When there was nothing else to do, The People liked being all crowded together, deliciously sprawled on top of one another. They liked this more than reading or playing computer games — skills they had learned, laboriously and tentatively, from The Masters. They preferred to lie coiled together, erogenous areas sometimes delightfully touching, sometimes delightfully almost touching.

Apart from eating, sleeping, and eliminating, they had been lying in this tangle since the nearly forgotten day when The Masters had led them aboard the ship.

But now something had changed. Kenny raised his head. "I sense something!" he cried.

The others looked up and tuned in. Kenny was the one who usually detected things first. But now they all sensed it.

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"Yes! What is it?"

"It's a planet! I sense a planet!"

Planetfall, at last! Just as the Masters had promised!

In a flash, The People were lifted from their erotic somnolence. The pleasures of their long idleness forgotten, they untangled themselves, got up, began jumping around and jabbering at each other. A planet, at last! The end of their long wait, the end of the endless journey! Now they could all sense the new place, looming up ahead of them in the sterile darkness of space.

Kenny said, "I must go to the Captain! I must find out when we are to start exploring!"

The others nodded. It hadn't occurred to them to visit the Captain. They thought the Captain would come to them when he decided to, when he had finished doing his other, more important things. But of course, Kenny was right.

Kenny was a tall, lean, brownish-red Person in the prime of life. He undogged the hatch and went out into the corridor. It was a long corridor with even lighting. There were signs pointing in the direction of officers' country. Kenny started out walking, but soon he was trotting, then running, because the great day was finally here.

He went to an elevator, pushed a button, and waited, dancing up and down with anticipation. The doors opened. Kenny hesitated a moment, wondering if he should have put on clothing before visiting the Captain. But no one had told him he had to. The People didn't bother wearing clothing. Not without a reason. And aboard the ship, with its even temperature, there seemed no reason for it.

One more corridor, and then he was at the door leading into Master's Country. Kenny paused, took a deep breath — this was a big moment — then opened the door and walked in. It only occurred to him later that perhaps he should have knocked first.

There was the Captain and the other ship's officers, sitting in front of their screens. At first no one noticed Kenny, so engrossed were they. They were playing one of the computer games that had been the rage back on their home planet. Kenny stood in the room waiting to be recognized.

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Through the main port he could see the planet, green and blue, coming up ahead of them. Automatics were bringing the ship to a safe landing. But still no one paid any attention. Until Kenny finally said, "Hey, doesn't someone want me to do something?"

"What?" The Captain was a short, pale, skinny Master, with a big head and large pop-eyes. He looked up, blinking. During the game, he had been practicing one of the narrowing trances, and it had been going very well. Regretfully he let his consciousness swim back to the surface of now, the unremitting now, the eternally disappointing now.

"We've arrived at the new place," Kenny said.

The Captain glanced at his instruments, then out the port. "Yes, so we have."

"In fact, we have landed."

"That's the usual procedure," the Captain said.

"I think it's customary now for the exploring phase to begin."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know, sir. The purpose of our mission. To find out if this planet will support life-forms of The People and The Masters."

"Ah, yes," the Captain said. "The purpose of it all. I had forgotten for the moment. These great conceptions get lost in the facticity of the moment. Exploring a new planet! Of course! How important! And yet, how droll, when you come to think of it."

The Captain turned to the other crew members sprawled on the deceleration couches. "Mandragan! Dexter! We're here!"

Mandragan was short and pale and skinny. He had a big head, like the Captain. He stirred sleepily. "I was having such a wonderful dream! Must we do this now?"

"Dreams later," the Captain said. "Now it is time for exploring."

Dexter, the observer, was a little taller than either the Captain or Mandragan, but he looked a lot like them.

Mandragan said, "Lot of nonsense, if you ask me. New worlds, indeed! Isn't it obvious that real exploration is into the wonder of ourselves, rather than into the banalities of the external?

The Captain said, "Very true! But we must abandon the delights of introspection and discursive philosophy and attend to the moment. Gentlemen, we are here!"

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Kenny cried, "Hurray!" and did a standing somersault, landing on his feet.

The Captain said, "Kenny, what was that all about?"

"An expression of pleasure, Master."

"I don't remember anyone programming you for that."

"It was spontaneous, Master. An expression of my pleasure at being on this long-awaited planet. Can The People go out and explore now?"

"I suppose it's what we came for," the Captain said.

Dexter had taken out his pad and stylus and was busy recording the moment. He looked up. "By the way, does this planet have one or two suns? I forgot to check as we came in. Though I suppose I could look now."

"Don't bother," The Captain said. "Kenny and the other People are going out there. They will look for us. Won't you, Kenny?"

"I'm eager to start exploring," Kenny said.

"Of course you are," the Captain said, his tone condescending. "But that's what we created The People for, isn't it?"

"So I have been told, Master," Kenny said.

KENNY LEFT to collect the rest of The People. Dexter said to the Captain, "So here we are, spreading human life to the stars. Quite a moment."

"I suppose so," the Captain said. "For those who are moved by such things. Back in the old, naive days, there were some who believed that the purpose of life was the mere perpetuation and continuation of life. They used to get all misty-eyed at the idea of spreading human life to distant planets. They could think of no greater purpose than to extend their species to some other planet, perhaps one with two suns. Do you think that's what it's all about, Dexter?"

"I believe it has something to do with spreading intelligence throughout the universe," Dexter said.

The Captain smiled. "That's what you and I are about, Dexter. We are the representatives of intelligence. And the purpose of intelligence is to develop to the point of putting itself out of business."

* * *

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Kenny and the other People came racing down the gangplank and onto the surface of the new planet. They paused a moment to sniff the air and taste the soil. It didn't kill them so they started running toward a nearby forest. They were a stream of people, large and robust, and variously colored white, red, black, yellow and brown, running upright for the most part although a few went on all fours.

"Look at them run," Dexter said, standing at the port. "How high they leap! It's almost as though they had wings!"

"Our scientists did consider giving them wings," the Captain said. "I believe one or two models were even tried. But discontinued. The weight-to-lift ratios were all wrong. Esthetically pleasing, however. Personally, I'm glad they stuck with the standard model. It's been around for millions of years, but it's still the best."

"Anything to drink around here?" one of The People asked, pausing at the fringe of the forest.

Kenny sniffed. "Water a couple of miles away, a lake I think! Straight ahead!" He and the others rushed into the forest.

Dexter and the Captain watched from the ship. They saw The People enter the woods and vanish from view.

"Will they come back to report on the water?" Dexter asked.

"No need," the Captain said. "I'm in telepathic contact with them. Kenny will report to me."

"Convenient," Dexter said.

"Saves lugging around a lot of equipment."

"What happens if the water poisons them?"

"We'll have to do something about that. Or perhaps find another planet."

"But The People will be dead."

"Plenty more where they came from," The Captain said.

Kenny reported, "The water is good, Masters. Everything here is good. Oh, there are some things not good to eat or drink, but they are minor, insignificant, easily avoided, the sort of thing you could find anywhere, even back home. Your own bodies are equipped to handle anything this planet has to offer. Now will you join us?"

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"We can't land the ship in the forest. But our radar shows an open space a few miles ahead."

"I can sense it, Master."

"Good. We'll meet you there."

Kenny loped off in the direction of the open space, the other People following. He wondered, not for the first time, why the Masters were so lazy. They went everywhere by machine. And when they needed to check something, they constructed an instrument instead of doing it themselves. Or they created The People to do it for them. The Masters were strange!

But why had they constructed The People to be able to move around on their own, even to make decisions, to try things out? That was supposed to be the Masters' job. Why had they given The People intelligence and autonomy, instead of using those things themselves? Was it because they were too lazy? Did they really think it was better to sit around playing games?

He knew how the Masters thought about them. They considered The People nothing more than intelligent multipurpose instruments, self-propelling. But surely they were more than that? Otherwise, why bother to create them?

The Captain stood at the port, looking out on the planet. All of The People were out of sight now. He sighed.

"Well, then," he said, "shall we get on with it?"

"To the rendezvous, sir?" Dexter said. "I'm ready."

"We're not going to the rendezvous! Really, Dexter, I thought you'd have caught on by now."

"Caught on? I'm afraid I don't understand, sir."

"Where we're going should be obvious. You young people can be a little obtuse."

Dexter was well over a thousand years old. Nothing to the Captain's estimated five thousand, but old enough to assume maturity. But still, he made no comment.

"Obvious, sir? Is it obvious to The People as well?"

"No, not to those dummies!"

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"Is there some other rendezvous point, sir?"

"Yes. Code name, home."

Dexter gaped.

"Real name, home, too."

"I don't understand, sir."

"You don't? It's really very simple. We're going back to our own planet."

"But The People — "

"They'll stay here, of course."

"But no one's warned them!"

"They'll figure it out. Maybe in a month or two, or a year or two, when they finally figure out we aren't coming back."

"But we're leaving them without any tools — weapons — food — "

"Plenty to eat here. Kenny said so himself. As for weapons, tools — well, they'll figure all that out for themselves. Maybe lose a few people, but the rest'll be okay."

Dexter wasn't so sure. "There are only a hundred of them. They've barely scratched the surface of this planet. One bad break and they could all be wiped out."

"No matter. We'll send out another group."

"But why not warn them? Prepare them?"

"You still don't get it, Dexter. This group, as far as they're concerned, are the first. The originals. The autochthons. They are The People. They figure out everything for themselves, or they die. They're not an extension of us. In a few generations, they'll forget we even existed. Except perhaps for a few unprovable legends. As far as they are concerned, they are a new race. No one came before them. They are the originals."

"They'll never know we created them?"

The Captain shook his head. "They can conjecture, but they'll never really know."

Dexter watched through the port as the ship lifted. He couldn't see any of The People. They were off in the forest somewhere. And they'd never know.

Then he had a thought.

"Captain, who created us?"

"There are various theories. You know what our leading thinkers say.

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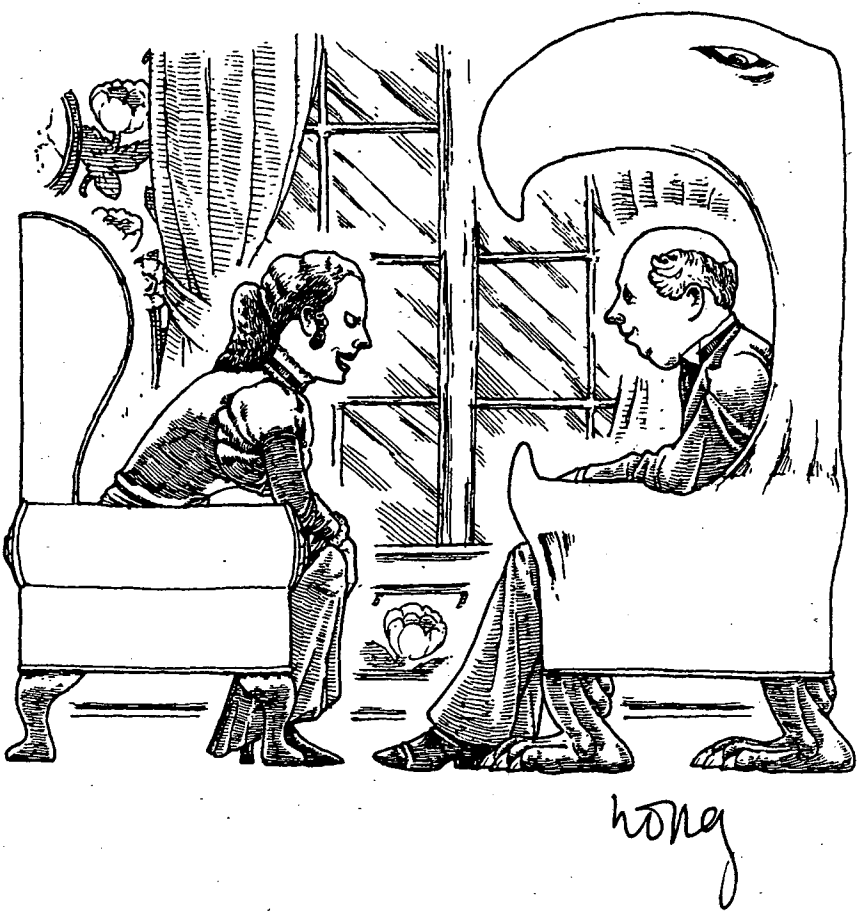
They talk about 'The most persuasive conjecture...' But that's all it is. Conjecture."

"Doesn't anyone know, really?"

The Captain looked ahead into darkening space. "If they do, they aren't telling us, Dexter. And we aren't telling them."



"I heartily concur, Steerbridge. Form does, indeed, follow function."

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Kate Wilhelm's first F&SF *story was "A Time to Keep" in the January 1962 issue. Her most recent one was "Forget Luck" in April 1996. We wish we didn't have to wait three years between stories, but one can hardly accuse Ms. Wilhelm of resting on her laurels—she has been writing suspense novels and thrillers at such a steady clip that her beleaguered book editor can scarcely keep pace. (*Defense for the Devil, *a courtroom thriller, is the most recent,* No Defense *is due out next year, and she's now finishing* The Darkest Water.*) This story follows "Forget Luck," but you needn't have read the first to enjoy this new one.*

The Happiest Day of Her Life

By Kate Wilhelm

THE DAY BEFORE THE HAPPIEST day of her life did not have an auspicious start for Reba Cameron. She heard her bedroom door open and opened her eyes enough to see a dim light coming in from the hall; she closed her eyes again. Her mother had slipped into the room; she could smell her. Still dark outside and Sonya was already doused with perfume, and, no doubt, had all her makeup perfectly in place. Reba did not stir as she tracked her mother's soft steps around the room; she would finger something or other, put it down, straighten something, move something else, pause at the mirror to smile at her reflection, move on.... When the door closed again, Reba looked at the clock. Six-thirty.

She groaned and pulled the blanket up over her head, desperate for at least one more hour of sleep, but now she could hear her mother's voice in the hall outside her door.

"Of course, I didn't wake her up. She's sleeping like a baby...." Reba drifted as the voice faded, then it sounded closer again. "I have a right to look at my child, for heaven's sake!...trying to sneak in her wedding

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without letting me know a thing about it." She was walking back and forth in the hall, apparently, the sound of her voice rising and falling as she neared the door, then drew away. Talking to Aunt Rebecca? Someone whose voice was too low to carry into the room, through the blanket.

Reba put her fingers in her ears.

"...ages ago! How was I supposed to know she'd still be engaged after such a long time?"

Reba had written to her four months ago, announcing her engagement, the date, everything, and in return had received a postcard with her mother's scrawl: *Darling, I am so excited...(illegible) Me, too. Mr. Wonderful...(illegible)...(illegible). Sonya.* Yesterday Sonya had called, and last night she had arrived with Mr. Wonderful, the New Guy. They were always the New Guy, this was number five. Maybe six. It didn't matter. He was the New Guy.

"I know we were all just a little excited last night, but it's perfectly clear that Bob should give her away. After all, he's her stepfather, and he brought his tuxedo...."

This time Sonya's voice faded away and didn't return. Maybe Aunt Rebecca had dragged her downstairs. Pushed her down the stairs? Reba shook her head. No such luck. Reluctantly she sat up, well aware that she would not go back to sleep that morning. She added items to the mental list of things she had to get done that day, and headed the list with the number one in importance. Tell her mother to butt out; the wedding was planned down to the last detail, and not a single thing would be changed. Uncle Walt, the only father she had ever known, her mother's brother, would walk her down the aisle, not the New Guy, whose name Reba couldn't even remember.

During her entire life she had lived with her mother for a total of six years off and on; the first two years she and her mother had lived here in Aunt Rebecca's house. After that she had been shipped off to Aunt Rebecca now and then while her mother and the current New Guy tried to work things out, or while her mother was in pursuit of a new New Guy, or for some other reason. When she was twelve she had come to stay.

According to Sonya, Reba's father had been a prince, a beautiful young man who had swept her off her feet, loved her passionately, and then mysteriously disappeared without realizing she was pregnant. She didn't

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know his last name. Just Cary. Like Cary Grant, only much, much better looking. Sonya, of course, had been a lovely naive girl, ready to be swept up, one who, Reba suspected, had always exuded clouds of pheromones. She never had any trouble landing a New Guy, and, pretty as she always had been and still was, never kept any of her catches more than a few years. Throwaway fish who didn't measure up to the Prince.

The problem was that the New Guys too often seemed to be intent on getting Reba killed. The first one, Harvey Wilson, had died in a stupid wreck that threw Reba out of the car into a shallow pond with a nice cushiony mud bottom. A different New Guy had fallen asleep on the couch and dropped a cigarette; a neighbor had dragged him out, but neither of them had remembered there was a child sleeping in the house. Reba had crawled out a dog door, following the poodle to safety. A miracle, everyone had declared. How had she managed to fit through? Later, a new New Guy had gone skiing with Sonya and Reba; the gondola lift had jerked; he had lurched forward and managed to push Reba over the side down to where she should have been killed on jutting basalt boulders. Instead, she had landed in a deep new-powder drift between rocks.

Reba continued to sit on the side of her bed, brooding about her mother, and her new New Guy. An omen, she thought bleakly. She had avoided her mother's New Guys for years, purposely had never paid them a visit. There had been a number of parental visits over the years, when Sonya would appear by herself, rearrange things for a few days, buy Reba some clothes or trinkets, try to curl her hair, give her advice about how to walk, how to sit, how to eat, what to eat; then she would leave, and Reba and Aunt Rebecca, sharing quiet relief, would restore order and get on with their lives.

And now there was a new New Guy in the house, an evil omen, certain to doom her wedding, doom her in all likelihood.

By the time Reba dragged herself into the shower, dressed and went downstairs, she had a grade-A headache. She stifled a groan when she saw that her mother was making a list.

"Darling, good morning!" Sonya cried. "Are you ill? Just nervous? You shouldn't drink coffee, if you're nervous. And it's perfectly normal to feel a bit jittery, but believe me, sweetheart, tomorrow will be the happiest day of your life. Your wedding day is always the happiest day of your life."

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"The voice of experience," Aunt Rebecca said, pouring coffee for Reba. "I was just about to scramble eggs. Walt will be down in a minute."

"None for me," Reba said. "Just coffee. I'll get a bite later. Mother, the wedding is all taken care of. There's not a thing for you to do except take it easy, relax. Okay?"

"Darling, you wouldn't believe how much I have to do! What I thought we'd do is shop a little. I can't wear a violet dress if Rebecca insists on wearing blue. And the wedding gift, of course. What pattern of silver do you have? But that's so boring, isn't it? I want something memorable for you. Then, I thought we'd meet and have lunch, just you and I, and Bob, of course. Or maybe not with Bob. A mother and daughter should have lunch alone on this occasion. Yes, definitely, just the two of us — "

"Mother! I'm sorry. I'm tied up all day, people at work planned lunch already — "

"She's so much like her father," Sonya said to Rebecca. "It took my breath away looking at her sleeping; she looks so much like him, and talks like him." Then she turned to Reba and said, "Darling, I don't want to upset any plans you already have, of course, but it does seem that on the last day of your life as a single girl you could take a little time out for the only mother you'll ever have."

The last day of her life! "Mother! I'm not a girl. I'm twenty-nine years old. I'm really happy you came in time for the wedding, but I have to work today, and I have a million things I have to take care of. I'll see you tonight." She put down her coffee cup, snatched up her purse and jacket, and headed for the front door.

Aunt Rebecca walked out with her to the porch. "Don't worry about her," she said, patting Reba's arm. "I won't let her near your room."

"Or the Gilfords, or the church, or the hotel," Reba muttered. "I'll call the hotel and tell them to add two more to the dinner party."

Sonya was coming toward them. "Darling, I hope you made an appointment to have your hair done..."

Reba fled.

It was downhill for the rest of the morning. Traffic crossing the bridge from Vancouver, Washington, into Portland, Oregon, was bumper to bumper with long inexplicable pauses between small incremental forward

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movements. Once she reached the hospital where she worked in the Records Department she found a message from the woman she had been training to replace her; she was ill, and would try to make it back by Monday. No one knew where she had put the mammograms from the previous week. A woman in Akron, Ohio, called demanding her complete records from twelve years ago. Two insurance companies were sending representatives to present the new requirements for their bookkeeping department. Reba was expected to drop everything else and see to the needs of the insurance companies....

Her office was the size of a small closet, and now, with a second chair for her replacement, there was so little space that when the door opened, it banged into the second chair. The only bright spot so far that morning had been a bouquet on her desk with a big number one on a stick poking out from a dozen yellow roses. Michael had started the countdown at day ten, and now there was one day left before the happiest day of her life. The phrase from her mother's lips made her own lips tighten. She called Aunt Rebecca to find out the name of the New Guy for his place card at the dinner party.

After that she phoned the special events coordinator at the New Columbian Hotel, only to be told that he was in conference, and would be available for a short period between twelve and twelve-thirty.

"I have to make a couple of changes for a dinner party tonight," Reba said. "Can I just leave him a message?"

"Hold on, I'll see if I can find his assistant."

Reba held the phone and tapped her fingers on the desk, knowing that the way things were shaping up, this call was doomed. Still holding the phone, she walked around her desk, out to the wide hall where people were scurrying around carrying X-ray films, stacks of medical records, someone pushing a cart of medical files, a lab technician with his blood-sucking gear walking her way. She spotted her friend Zelda and waved her over, then, holding her hand on the mouthpiece of the phone, she said she would not be able to make it for lunch. She had lied about the office party luncheon; she and Zelda had planned a very quiet lunch with just the two of them.

She was explaining when the phone squawked in her ear, and at the same time the lab technician said, "Ms. Cameron?" Another cart of

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records was moving toward them; she waved the technician into the office, and said into the phone, "I'm here, still waiting."

"I can't find Mr. Warner's assistant. She must have stepped out or something. Maybe you'd better come around and tell him what you want."

Reba looked at her watch, twenty minutes before twelve. "I'll be right over," she said, and shoved her office door open to reenter.

The technician apparently had been standing by the second chair in the cramped space and the opening door hit his arm, sent his equipment flying; glass vials shattered on the desk, on the wall, on the floor.

"Oh, God!" he moaned. He looked as if he might cry.

Reba stared at the mess, as near tears as he seemed to be. "Good heavens! I'm sorry. I'll tell someone to send for maintenance. I'm terribly sorry." She went around her desk, hung up the phone, and got her purse from a drawer. He stood like a statue, as if hypnotized by the scattered equipment, the shards of glass. "Hey," she said, more sharply, "I said I'm sorry. It's not the end of the world. Shit happens. What did you want, anyway?"

"Just to draw some blood from you. I'll get some clean stuff. Will you wait a minute or two?" He looked at her with a despairing expression.

"I can't. What's it for? Who told you to draw blood from me?" She paused at the door.

"Dr. Bressler," he mumbled. "It's a...a new test or something. He said to get yours first since you'll be leaving."

"I don't know a Dr. Bressler," she said coldly. "I don't participate in new tests that I know nothing about, and I have to leave like this very second." She left him standing there with an agonized look on his face.

THE NEW COLUMBIAN Hotel was a vast complex, hotel, conference center, convention hall, private party rooms.... It had not been the Cameron group's choice for the dinner party, too expensive for them, but Michael's mother had prevailed, and Reba had seen little point in getting into a fight over it. Now, when she stepped from the revolving door into the lobby, she came to a dead stop, gaping.

The lobby was immense, on several levels, part of the floor purple and

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green marble, part of it grape-colored plush carpet. There were many crystal chandeliers, dozens of arrangements of green and gold sofas and chairs, black marble table tops, black marble counters... And scurrying about were several dozen men in funny hats, some wearing striped engineers' overalls, some carrying oil cans, some carrying parts of train sets, others laying track. Half of the lobby was roped off with gold velvet ropes and behind the barrier the men were laying out miniature railroads.

The revolving door revolved and someone bumped Reba from behind; she began to walk toward the information counter. She paused at the bulletin board announcing current events. A rather fat bald man moved a little to one side to make room for her. A convention of train buffs, she realized, was happening this weekend. Also a conference of scientists and computer people. A golden wedding anniversary party dance, other events. Near the bottom of the list the announcement of her wedding party, to be held in the Blue Heron Room. At least that part was okay, she decided, and continued toward the information counter.

The clerk at the counter called Mr. Warner, who would be out in just a minute. Leaning against the counter, waiting, she watched the railroad buffs setting up a maze of tracks complete with tunnels, bridges, switching yards. A lot of onlookers were calling out encouragement, giving advice, heckling.... And up on the mezzanine another group of spectators was laughing, pointing, nudging one another. The computer people, she thought; their meeting rooms were all on the mezzanine level. They looked very young for the most part, dressed in jeans, sweatshirts, with too-long hair.... Stereotypes all, she mocked herself. Then she noticed that one of the upper-level spectators was gazing fixedly at something other than the trains, something that held him with rapt attention, apparently. She turned to see what it was and was shocked to see the lab technician whose day she had ruined talking to the old bald man near the bulletin board.

The older man was red-faced, furious looking; the other man more abject, more miserable than before, his head ducked, hands twitching at his sides, not saying a word. Abruptly the bald man turned and stalked away; the young man followed, keeping a few steps behind him.

Reba looked again at the mezzanine, but now the rail was just packed

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with the young jeans-clad men. The one who had been watching the little scene at the bulletin board was out of sight.

Then Mr. Warner appeared from his office and he held her hand with both of his and called her my dear. Of course, it was no problem to seat two additional people, he reassured her. She gave him the names to put on the new place cards, Sonya and Robert Zucker, and if she had left it at that, she would have been done with it in five minutes, but she added that Mrs. Zucker was her mother.

"Oh dear! We'll have to rearrange the entire seating plan!"

"No, we won't. Just put Mother down at Dr. Gilford's right, and Mr. Zucker at her side, and leave the rest alone."

"No, no, my dear. It's customary to have the mother of the bride-to-be at one end of the table, and the father of the groom-to-be at the other end. And of course the happy couple side by side in the center with the bride-to-be closer to her mother."

Very carefully she said, "I don't want my mother to take my aunt's place at the head of the table. I don't care what is customary." The wedding party was for the immediate families, the attendants, and, of course, the bride and groom, twenty-two in all now. She wanted the New Guy as far away from her as possible.

"But the arrangements, the flowers, the little special things that make it so very unique. Think of the photographs, your keepsakes.... Think how it would look if you didn't honor your mother by letting her have her proper place."

She told him again how she wanted the seating arrangement, and he explained again what was customary, and how bad it would look. People would think he didn't know any better, and she said, "Mr. Warner, think how it would look if I didn't pay for this dinner party!" But she knew she would have to arrive before anyone else did, and make certain the place cards were where she intended them to be.

She was cursing under her breath when she left him, her lunch hour blown. The lobby was more crowded than before; more railroaders, more observers, more people arriving with suitcases. People were clustered at the bulletin board. Trying to ignore them all, she was heading for the revolving door when she paused and looked at the group studying the current events. Among them was the man she had seen on the mezzanine,

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the one who had been fascinated by the bald man and the lab technician. Only she no longer believed he was a legitimate lab technician.

The man she had been watching left the group, came to a halt and smacked himself on the forehead. She distinctly heard him say, "Wow! Dummy! Of course!" He ran toward the entrance of the hotel, didn't bother with the revolving door, but pushed the heavy glass door open and ran out.

He didn't look crazy, she thought. He was nice looking, dark hair, not long enough to be a computer guy, although he looked young enough to be one of them. The clincher was that he was dressed in a sports coat and slacks, shirt open at the neck, and real shoes, not in the computer nerd uniform of jeans, sweatshirt and court shoes. He didn't look old enough to be a mad scientist, but maybe he was working at it.

She shook her head, a mistake; her headache was back.

That afternoon was even more hectic than the morning had been, since there had been yet another interruption when she had to arrange for maintenance to come clean up broken glass. Her aunt called at three.

"Honey, I asked Jack to drop off a few things from the grocery for me. Can he bring anything back there for you?"

Jack, her cousin, who was more like a brother to Reba, lived in Portland. For him to go shopping for his mother, drive over the bridge and back again could only mean that Sonya and the New Guy were hanging around; Aunt Rebecca didn't dare go off and leave the house to them.

"Aren't *they* going out to shop or something?"

"In and out, in and out," Aunt Rebecca said lightly.

Within earshot, Reba guessed. She made up her mind quickly and told her aunt about the place cards. "I have to get over there by six-thirty to make sure that creep got the message. If you could slip away and put my dress and shoes and stuff in a bag and ask Jack to bring it all over here to the hospital, I won't even try to drive home, dress, and get back over that early. I'll go straight to the hotel and dress there."

"No trouble, not at all," Aunt Rebecca said. "See you later."

People began to drift in to tell her goodbye, wish her bon voyage, congratulate her, express envy, and she knew there would be no more work done that day. She began to straighten out her desk, tried to call

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Michael again, and got his machine again. He had called while she was out, naturally, and they had missed each other throughout the day. He had worked that morning, post-op patients, he had said with a sigh. He was an ophthalmologist, like his father, and worked in the same clinic where his father played God as head of it all, and he had put in a full week, just as she had done. Even if he had as much to do as she did, he could have called, she thought angrily; she had been in the office all afternoon. He didn't even know yet that her mother had turned up.

Two more co-workers came by and chatted a few minutes, left again. She regarded a half-eaten sandwich on her desk with disgust and tossed it into the wastebasket where shards of glass glinted. It was really Michael's fault, she thought suddenly. This had been one of the worst days of her life and he was to blame. When her lease expired in July she had suggested that she might move in with him instead of going through the hassle of trying to find a new apartment, moving; it would have to be on a monthly basis, not yearly as her old apartment had been. She might be kicked out again any month. But he had shaken his head and said gravely, "Darling, you don't realize the high regard my folks have for you, how much it means to me that they are so crazy about you. But if we started living together before the wedding.... Well, I don't think we should."

His father, she had thought bitterly, would not approve. Then, at her aunt and uncle's urging, she had moved back to their house, back home. It would save her a lot of money, and God knew she needed it. But if she were living in Michael's apartment, just a few blocks from the New Columbian Hotel, she wouldn't be waiting for Jack to sneak clothes to her, making her feel like a fugitive; there would be a good safe distance between her and the new New Guy, time now to go take a shower, relax a few minutes.

Jack appeared with a garment bag and a carry-on flight bag. He gave her a conspiratory wink, and left again just as Zelda appeared in the doorway to bid Reba a tearful goodbye.

The hotel lobby was a crush of people, four deep around the gold rope keeping spectators away from the whizzing trains. A whistle sounded, and a bell.... Groups of people were standing around with drinks in their hands; it appeared that most of the chairs were occupied, waiters were

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rushing around with trays.... It was Happy Hour. Reba pushed her way through to the corridor that led to the Blue Heron Room, and found the double doors closed and locked. She went to the front desk jammed with people who evidently had just arrived.

The bell captain was busy directing traffic; the woman at the information counter was swamped. Finally Reba stepped in front of a hurrying waiter. "I need to get in the Blue Heron Room. Who can open the door for me?"

"Not until after six-thirty," he said, side-stepping around her. "Private party, can't have people wandering in and out." He scurried away.

Resignedly she started to make her way back to the corridor. She saw the bald man who had been in the lobby earlier and was startled when he detached himself from a group, keeping his gaze fixed on her. She hurried out of the lobby to find a women's room where she could change her clothes.

By the time she was changed, had found a cloakroom and checked her things, it was past six-thirty; she had to push her way through the lobby once more, and again she saw the bald man, this time talking to a young woman with frizzy blond hair and a lot of makeup; both of them were watching her. They turned away swiftly. What was he? Security or something? Did he think she was a jewel thief? A pickpocket? Angrily, she continued to her own party room, and this time found the doors unlocked. Two waitresses were fussing around the table when she approached. She nodded to them, and began to pick up the place cards, more furious than ever. That sneaky little bastard had arranged them to suit himself, Sonya at one end of the table, Dr. Gilford at the other.

"You're not supposed to be in here yet, Miss," one of the waitresses said timidly. "You can't move things around."

"I damn well can. It's my party!" She picked up two orchid corsages and moved them to their proper places. She glared at the two women. "If you touch them or tell anyone, I'll find you and wring your necks!"

The other waitress shrugged and said, "Fine with me."

Reba sat down to wait for her party to begin. Drinks at seven, dinner at eight, out by eleven, she had promised Mr. Warner, and she only hoped out by eleven would happen. After eleven quite a few of the guests would go up to the lounge where there was live music, a dance floor, even a floor

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show on weekends. But out by eleven would be more her speed, she thought tiredly.

A few minutes before eight there were twenty-two people in the room, immediate family and wedding attendants, all talking at once. Sonya was charming the two doctors, senior and junior, and Reba was carefully dodging the New Guy, keeping out of his reach. She mouthed, "Powder room," to her aunt, slipped out, and headed for the nearest women's room. A few minutes later, at the sink, she reached up with both hands to smooth down her hair. Dr. Gilford always tousled it as if she were a small child.

The door flew open and Sonya cried, "Darling, he's gorgeous! What a catch!"

At the same moment another voice said, "Hold still, there's something crawling in your hair."

Reba whirled around to glare at her mother, and her elbow caught the other woman in the face. She screamed piercingly.

Sonya cried, "She was attacking you!"

Reba stared at the woman, the frizzy-haired blond, who had her hand clapped to her eye.

"I'm hurt! You hit me in the eye!"

"Mother, go get Michael." Sonya hurried out. Reba put her arm around the other woman's shoulder and said, "Let's go out to a chair. Let you sit down. A doctor's coming. I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry. I didn't even see you." She took the woman out to a small alcove with several chairs and seated her there, then stood patting her, trying to soothe her, or at least stop her from screaming again.

Michael came rushing down the corridor and he knelt on one knee before the injured woman and gently took her hand away from her eye. She had smeared mascara all over her face. "Let's have a look," he said. "See, the eye is a marvelous invention. When something gets too near, it just automatically closes down, shuts tight. You don't think about it; it just happens. A reflex." He talked as he examined her eye, then he turned and said to someone behind Reba, "Maybe you could go find some crushed ice and a plastic bag, and a couple of small towels. Nothing serious here, just a little bump."

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Reba turned to see the bald man staring at the woman, then at Reba. He looked frightened. The woman saw him, too, and she yelled, "I quit! You can keep your stinking work! I'm through!"

The man hurried away as Sonya and Aunt Rebecca appeared and Michael said in his reassuring doctor's voice, "Go on back and tell the folks that it's a little mishap, nothing serious. I won't be very long." He held up his hands with a rueful expression. His fingers were black with mascara.

"I'll be there in a minute," Reba said and ducked back into the women's room. She was shaking all over. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she was deathly pale, like a person in shock. "I should have seen her," she said under her breath. If the woman had come from the side, from behind, from anywhere at all, Reba should have seen her reflection in the mirror, but she had seen nothing. "I'm losing my mind," she whispered. She doused her face with cold water, got a drink from a tiny cup, and gradually her shaking eased, some color returned to her cheeks.

When she returned to the alcove, Michael was doing something with a plastic bag of ice and the towel. He waved her away. "A few more minutes," he said.

She walked down the corridor again, then hesitated. Ahead, leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest was the other man, the one she thought of as the watcher, and he had a wide idiotic grin on his face. He gave her a thumbs up sign and she felt her cheeks flare with heat. She hurried inside the Blue Heron Room and was immediately surrounded by the party guests wanting to know what happened.

"She was attacked by this perfectly strange woman and she defended herself heroically!" Sonya cried. "I saw the whole thing. I'll be your witness when she sues."

Someone put a glass of champagne in Reba's hand, and although she rarely drank anything, she gulped it down. Sonya was going on about the attack, what she had seen with her own eyes. "I think she had a knife, or maybe just scissors, or a scalpel. Have there been serial murders in the area recently?"

Reba had a second glass of champagne, and since she had decided she was losing her mind, she realized that although it seemed too long a time for Michael to be gone, that could well be one of her symptoms, a time distortion of some sort.

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Finally Michael reappeared. He took her in his arms and kissed her; there was applause. Then he held up her hand and declared, "The winner! And still champ! The loser has a shiner. Can we eat now?" There was more applause, and they began to sort themselves out at the table.

The most miserable dinner of her life, Reba thought gloomily, waiting for overcooked salmon to be removed, something else to be placed before her. Sonya, at the senior Dr. Gilford's right, was working on him, and he was lapping it up happily. Mrs. Gilford was not happy. The New Guy kept leaning forward to tell Dr. Gilford about a mysterious recurring pain in his lower back. Michael kept reassuring Reba in an undertone that she had not done any damage to the woman, who, he said, was a graduate student Dr. Bressler had encouraged to attend the scientific conference. Dr. Bressler didn't have any idea about what she had meant by what she said. He was baffled, bewildered, at a loss. Michael went on and on, and Reba caught a hastily erased expression of concern, or even pity, on Aunt Rebecca's face. Her aunt had not been as happy as her mother was about this engagement, the wedding tomorrow.

"Isn't it the most romantic place of all for a honeymoon!" Sonya was saying. "Hawaii, the palm trees, warm water...."

"See, it just comes on without any warning. I'm fine, then whammo, right in the lower back. Like a toothache."

"We told the baby sitter we'd be back before twelve."

"And then just the tiniest movement, a finger twitch or something, and it hits you. The baby is there, it's moving."

"You wouldn't believe the estimates we've been getting for one lousy roof, not even a whole roof, a section. All over the map...."

She smiled and smiled until her face hurt. When she raised her glass she used elaborate caution. No more accidents. The third one would be fatal, that's how it worked. The dessert of flaming cherries jubilee filled her with dread. She might start a fire, burn down the hotel and everyone in it. How had she managed to get through a tiny dog door? The last day of her life. The toasts started and she sneaked a glance at her watch. It was eleven-thirty. Mr. Warner would charge a bundle for going overtime. The happiest day of her life would start in half an hour. They would have a house in the country, where the kids could have ponies. Two or even three children, that's what Michael wanted, and for them to start a family right

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away, and she had agreed, but right away? He was thirty-six, it was time, he had said. As soon as his father knew he was really settled down he planned to retire, let Michael run the whole shebang. But right away? His father had been afraid Michael was gay, he had hinted; he had to prove something.

"Let's go up to the café and have a few quiet minutes after this is over," Michael said softly. "I'll take you home later."

"I have my car here."

"But you're in no shape to drive it," he said with a grin. "I've never seen you drink before, or look so happy before, either."

She smiled and smiled. But he was right; she couldn't drive, and she was terrified of getting in a car with the new New Guy. She nodded. And finally it was over, and Michael told her mother and Aunt Rebecca that he would bring Reba home later.

"I'll wait up for you, darling," Sonya said. "Don't be too late. You need a *little* rest before. You know."

The New Guy was singing "Get Me to the Church on Time"; there were hugs and kisses and gradually the room emptied. Michael took her hand and they walked out to the corridor, to the lobby and the elevators, to go to the café on the third floor.

Some of the wedding guests were going up also, heading for the lounge and the floor show, also on the third floor. They tried to talk Michael and Reba into joining them, but he shook his head. "Quiet time," he said, holding her, and she simply leaned against him, too tired to add a word.

They walked past the lounge; music followed them down the hallway around the corner and to the door of the café. Inside, the room was quiet, with a low hum of voices, and it was dimly lighted. Michael started to lead her toward a high-backed booth, but she pulled away and pointed to the tables by the wide windows, where she could look out and see the city lights and the reflections of lights on the river. She sank into her chair and breathed out a long sigh.

The waiter appeared instantly. "Double espresso," she said.

"Two," Michael said. "Decaf."

"Not mine. I need a shot of caffeine or I'll fall asleep sitting up with my eyes open."

The waiter left.

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"Tough day?"

She nodded.

"Me too. You know that woman you slugged?"

"I didn't slug her. It was an accident."

"Oh, right. Well, the fellow I was talking to, her mentor, is pretty interesting. He's a famous scientist, overdue for the Nobel for work in genetics. We chatted a couple of minutes."

She yawned widely.

"I've read about him for years, and his articles turn up all the time in journals. Reba, are you hearing a word?"

She had been watching how the reflections broke when invisible boats passed through them. "Sorry," she said. "I'm listening. Oh, good, the coffee."

The waiter put slender clear-glass cups down and withdrew; the cups reflected candlelight that turned the coffee deep red.

She lifted her cup and sipped; the coffee was too hot to drink yet, but she liked the way the candlelight shone through it.

"Reba, he asked me to help him with his work," Michael said. "Can you believe it! It's like Einstein asking someone for help with his equation. Actually, he wants both of us to help him."

Very carefully she set down her cup. She felt tingling all over, as if that one sip of espresso had revitalized every nerve in her body. "What do you mean?"

"He'll even credit me for assistance. You can remain anonymous, of course; no one wants to invade your privacy."

"What does he want?"

"Just a drop or two of blood, so he can examine the DNA, find a certain gene he's — "

"No."

"It won't be more than a pinprick. You've stuck yourself more pruning roses. I'll swab off the tip of your finger — "

"No!"

He pulled a thin plastic package from his pocket, unzipped it, and drew out another slim package and as he started to unroll it, she could see instruments gleaming. A test tube, slides. "It won't take a minute, then a kiss to make it well."

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"Michael, I said no. Put that stuff away. No!"

"Reba, be reasonable. It's not a big deal, just one little pinprick. Think what it would mean for me. I'm tired of walking in my father's shadow; this could be important for me."

He reached across the table for her hand, and she jerked away, upsetting her coffee that had looked like blood, but was simply a spreading brown puddle on the white tablecloth. In a continuous motion with the reflexive jerk of her hand, she jumped to her feet and started toward the door. Suddenly she stopped, and, feeling almost like a somnambulist, she returned to the table where Michael was hurriedly stuffing everything back in his pocket. He took his wallet out, fumbled for a bill. Wordlessly she pulled off her diamond ring and laid it in the pool of coffee, and then walked out fast.

"Reba! Wait up! Hold it! Forget the whole thing."

She kept walking fast, out the door, down the corridor to the turn. Some train buffs were coming from the lounge, regrouping in the corridor, talking, laughing, carrying drinks. She did not slow down.

"Reba, for God's sake, stop! Let me explain."

She plowed straight through the group at the lounge. One of the men yelped and spilled his drink. She kept walking.

"Reba! Stop acting like a child! Stop this nons — "

There was a crashing sound and someone yelled, a woman screamed. Now Reba stopped and turned to look. Michael was sprawled on the floor. She shook from head to toe; she had done it again. Another accident. The third one, the fatal one. Slowly now she began to walk back toward the group. One of the men was kneeling at Michael's side; someone else said in a loud voice, "He slipped on the ice." Then a cat leaped out of the lounge and pushed its way through to Michael. Reba blinked hard. A woman in a body suit with leopard spots. The woman pushed the man away from Michael and cried, "Mikey! Get an ambulance! Call nine one one. Someone do something! Mikey! Baby, open your eyes!"

Reba took another step.

Michael stirred and groaned. He tried to push himself up from the floor and groaned again, louder. "I think my leg's broken." He looked around dazedly, then said, "Crystal!"

She pulled his head to her breast and held him, crooning softly.

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"You'll be all right. An ambulance is on the way. Don't try to move, baby." He closed his eyes and didn't try to move.

Reba took one more step. Then she saw the bald man, the scientist, and he held up both hands before him, as if to ward her off, to defend himself. He backed up a step or two, turned and ran. The other one, the watcher, was leaning against the wall, laughing.

She turned around and walked again until she came to a wide staircase and followed it down until it ended on the mezzanine. There were only a few people there now watching the trains that continued to whiz around, up and over trestles that crossed streams, through tunnels, blowing whistles, ringing bells. She leaned against the rail and watched the trains.

"I'd choose that blue and silver one with the smokestack," someone said.

"Me, too. A nice slow train to nowhere in particular. Why have you been following me?" She glanced at him then.

"Not you. I've been keeping an eye on Bressler, and he's been watching you, so there I was, too. Her name's Crystal Spring. She's a dancer."

"Ah."

"And you're Rebecca Cameron."

"I know."

"And your aunt is also Rebecca Cameron. That's what had me confused."

"Is this a guessing game? Am I supposed to try to guess what your name is?"

"No. I'm Tony Manetti."

"With the computer gang?"

"Not really. I work for a journal that covers meetings like this for a monthly feature. I'm on assignment."

They became silent as a siren sounded closer and closer, then abruptly stopped.

"He isn't hurt bad. Just a broken leg," Tony Manetti said. "I don't think it will slow him down much."

"I think you're right."

"What did he try to do?"

"Get a drop of blood, or maybe two. That's all."

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"A drop today, a pint tomorrow. Who knows where it would end? Are you hungry? Want a hamburger? There's a pretty good place down the street about a block."

She glanced down at her party dress. "I have to get my jacket."

"Here," he said, pulling off his sport coat. "It's not very far."

Holding it, she said, "You know what this is all about, don't you?"

"Yes. Tell you the whole story over a hamburger and a shake. Deal?"

She put on his coat. "Deal."

THE HAMBURGER joint was busy; a lot of the computer nerds were there, talking and eating, drawing diagrams or something on napkins.... Several of them waved to Tony when he and Reba entered. A couple of them motioned to Tony to join them. He waved back and kept walking.

"You understand what they're talking about? You go to their panels, all that?" Reba slid into a booth and he sat opposite her.

"Not a single one. How it works is they give me copies of their papers, their presentations, and I read them in the privacy of my own home, write my summation, and I'm done for the month."

They ordered hamburgers with everything, fries, and chocolate shakes, and then she said, "So tell me about that crazy man, the bald mad scientist."

"You up for a dose of genetics?" She rolled her eyes and he grinned. "I'll try to keep it short. Bressler has done a lot of important work in the field, but a few years ago he came up with a theory he's been obsessed with ever since. He believes that certain people have genetic material, one or more genes that act as guardians. The carriers of those genes have what look like miraculous escapes from death or at least serious injury. If genes themselves are immortal, as is generally accepted now, this particular genetic string has endured through the ages, and continues to get passed on, and he's hot on the trail of some people he's identified as having the right characteristics to qualify as carriers. Like girls who crawl out of a burning house through a doorway too small for them to fit through. He's trying to get DNA material from those people so he can identify the gene or genes, isolate them, and go on from there."

She was shaking her head in disbelief. "He thinks I'm a carrier?"

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"He's certain of it."

"That's insane. A lot of people have lucky escapes from danger. You read about them all the time. Just plain ordinary people who got lucky."

"He narrowed his field of research to those who have had at least three such escapes. Under three he's willing to concede that it's coincidence, or luck, or guardian angel, or whatever. But three or more? He wants to have a look at their DNA."

Their food came and she was starved, and apparently so was he. They ate in silence; she kept trying to make sense of what he had told her, and could find no sense in any of it. Then, with most of the hamburger gone, and only a few fries remaining, she said, "Why doesn't he just go to those people and ask for a sample of blood or something? Most people cooperate if they know it's for a good purpose, good research. People volunteer all the time; I see them at work every day, trying out new drugs, being tested for this or that."

"Not these people," Tony said. He was grinning. "It seems that every time he sends out one of his graduate students to get a sample, an accident happens. The genes don't want to be collected."

"Oh, God," she said with a groan. "Crazier and crazier. Okay, so he believes that, but he's mad. What do you believe? And how do you know so much about it? Did he tell you? Have you written about it?"

"One question at a time," Tony protested. "Last summer at a conference like this one he handed me a stack of his research papers. He wanted me to help get a DNA sample, and he told me a little about his project. The next day he yanked the papers back and said more or less to forget it. But I had copied all the papers, and I read them. That's how I know about it. Over the summer I visited a few of his subjects, talked to them, and they all fit the profile. Only children. Miraculous escapes. Never really sick. Never gain too much weight, or lose it. None of them would volunteer for any testing, or donate blood. And curious accidents happen to anyone who tries to sneak a sample." He laughed. "I witnessed part of your day. Was there anything else?"

She told him about the phony lab technician, and the accident in the women's room, and he laughed louder. "But wait a minute," she said. "If you know people are going to have accidents if they get near me, why aren't you afraid?"

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"Because I'm not after your blood. The genes aren't afraid of me."

She shook her head. "You keep saying things like that. The genes cause accidents? They're aware of danger? Come on! Give me a break."

"You tell me something," Tony said seriously then. "Why did you come out with me tonight? The middle of the night, a strange man, and you didn't even hesitate. Why did you even notice Bressler today? That lobby was crawling with fat bald men. Why did you notice me? I look like dozens of guys who come and go in a mob scene like that hotel."

She realized she couldn't tell him. She didn't know why.

"I fell out of a barn loft and walked away from it," he said. "Lightning hit a boat I was in and two guys were killed. I swam to shore. I was shot twice; either one would have been fatal if I hadn't moved at exactly the right second. They were just grazes instead."

She stared at him. "Why isn't he after your blood?"

"He doesn't know about me. I didn't make the newspapers the way you did."

Slowly then she said, "Let's understand one thing. I don't believe a word of this. I think it's insane. But if you do believe it, and if you know he's legitimate, that he's doing real research into something that could be important, why don't you just go to him and volunteer your DNA?"

"Why didn't you let your ex-fiancé get a drop of blood tonight?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Neither do I. I don't think we can volunteer. The genes don't want to be discovered."

She stared at him as a shiver raised goose bumps on her arms. "Why not?" she asked in a low voice.

"I don't know."

"Eventually he'll find a way to get a sample," she said after a moment. "There has to be a way, even if he has to use force. Or bribery, like with Michael. If he hadn't tried to get the drop of blood then and there.... He probably would have succeeded after we were married. Then what?"

"I don't know. But I don't think you would have been allowed to marry him after he became a threat. Why did you say yes in the first place?"

She didn't even remember how she had answered that question when her aunt asked. Slowly she said, "I kept waiting and waiting for some-

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thing. I didn't know what it was. Then I thought you could wait all your life, but nothing ever happens. He asked and I said yes."

"I never dated an eligible girl or woman in my life," Tony said softly.

"Apparently I didn't either."

His hand was on the table, palm up. With fascination she watched her own hand move, not because she was willing it to, or had even thought of moving it, but it reached out and came to rest in his hand, the first time they had touched each other. She closed her eyes hard and swallowed hard. His grip tightened and when she opened her eyes she saw that he had paled and his eyes were closed. He swallowed hard and opened his eyes.

"Sometimes," he said huskily, "something happens."

It was three o'clock in the morning of the happiest day of her life.

"So you figured out how to grow hair everywhere but where you wanted it."

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Once upon a time, the story goes, Gene Wolfe sent an editor a gingerbread house for Christmas. That editor left the treat beside the coffee machine so the entire department could enjoy it. For half a day the house sat untouched. Then one brave assistant editor finally broke off a large piece, and within minutes only a few shreds of gingerbread remained. "I think everyone was afraid to mess up anything so beautiful," said one witness. "That hardly seems likely—" came the reply. "These people are editors."

This anecdote has no bearing whatsoever on "A Fish Story," but it's too good to leave untold. Gene's first F&SF *story was "Car Sinister" in the January 1970 issue and we're delighted he took time out from working on his new novel* On Blue's Waters, *to tell us a new one...*

A Fish Story

By Gene Wolfe

I AM ALWAYS EMBARRASSED by the truth. For one thing, I am a writer of fiction, and know that coming from me it will not be believed; nor does it lend itself to neat conclusions in which the hero and heroine discover the lost silver mine. So bear with me, or read something else. This is true — and because it is, not quite satisfactory.

We three were on a fishing trip along a certain river in Minnesota. We had put Bruce's boat in the water that morning and made our way in a most dilatory fashion downstream, stopping for an hour or two at any spot we thought might have a muskie in it. That night we camped on shore. The next day we would make our way to the lake, where Bruce's wife and mine would meet us about six. Rab, who had never married, would ride as far as Madison with my wife and me. We had not caught much, as I remember; but we had enough to make a decent meal, and were eating it when we saw the UFO.

I do not mean that we saw a saucer-shaped mother ship from a far-off galaxy full of cute green people with feelers. When I say it was a UFO, I

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mean merely what those three letters indicate — something in the air (lights, in our case) we could not identify. They hovered over us for a half minute, drifted off to the northeast, then receded very fast and vanished. That was all there was to it; in my opinion, we had witnessed a natural phenomenon of some sort, or seen some type of aircraft.

But of course we started talking about them, and Roswell, and all that; and after a while Bruce suggested we tell ghost stories. "We've all had some supernatural experience," Bruce said.

And Rab said, "No."

"Oh, of course you have." Bruce winked at me.

"I didn't mean that nothing like this has ever happened to me," Rab said, "just that I don't want to talk about it."

I looked at him then. It was not easy to read his face in the firelight, but I thought he seemed frightened.

It took about half an hour to get the story out of him. Here it is. I make no comment because I have none to make; I do not know what it means, if it means anything.

"I've always hated ghosts and all that sort of thing," Rab began, "because I had an aunt who was a spiritualist. She used to read tea leaves, and bring her Ouija board when she came to dinner, and hold séances, and so on and so forth. When I was a little boy it scared me silly. I had nightmares, really terrible nightmares, and used to wake up screaming. All that ended when I was thirteen or fourteen, and since then I've despised the whole stupid business. Pretty soon one of you is going to ask if I've ever seen a ghost, so I'll answer that right now. No. Never.

"Well, you don't want my life history. Let's just say that I grew up, and after a while my mother and father weren't around anymore, or married to each other either. My sister was living in England. She's moved to Greece, but I still hear from her at Christmas.

"One day I got home from work, and there was a message from Dane County Hospital on my machine. Aunt Elspeth was dying, and if I wanted to see her one last time, I had better get over there. I didn't want to. I had disliked her all my life, and I was pretty sure the feeling was mutual. But I thought of her alone in one of those high, narrow beds, dying and knowing that nobody cared that she was dying. So I went.

"It was the most miserable four or five hours I've ever spent. She

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looked like hell, and even though they had her in an oxygen tent, she couldn't breathe. She kept taking these great gasping breaths...."

Rab demonstrated.

"And in between breaths she talked. She talked about my grandparents' house, which I've never seen, and how it had been there when she and Mom were kids. Not just about them and my grandparents, but the neighbors, the dogs and cats they'd owned, and everything. The furniture. The linoleum on the kitchen floor. Everything. After a while I realized that she was still talking even when she wasn't talking. Do you know what I mean? She would be taking one of those horrible breaths, and I'd still hear her voice inside my head.

"It was getting pretty late, and I thought I'd better go. But there was something I wanted to say to her first — I told you how much I hate ghosts and all that kind of crazy talk. Anyway, I cut her off while she was telling about how she and my mother used to help my grandmother can tomatoes, and I said, 'Aunt Elspeth, I'd like you to promise me something. I want your word of honor on it. Will you do that? Will you give it to me?'

"She didn't say anything, but she nodded.

"'I want you to promise me that when you're gone, if there's any possible way for you to speak to me, or send me a message — make any kind of signal of any sort — to say that there's another life after the life we know here, another existence on the other side of the grave, you won't do it. Will you give me your solemn promise about that, Aunt Elspeth? Please? And mean it?'

"She didn't say anything more after that, just lay there and glared at me. I wanted to go, and I tried to a couple of times, but I couldn't make myself do it. There she was, about the only person still left from my childhood, and she was dying — would probably die that night, they had said. So I sat there instead, and I wanted to take her hand but I couldn't because of the oxygen tent, and she kept on glaring at me and making those horrible sounds trying to breathe, and neither of us said anything. It must have been for about an hour.

"I guess I shut my eyes — I know I didn't want to look at her — and leaned back in the chair. And then, all of a sudden, the noises stopped. I leaned forward and turned on the little light at the head of her bed, and she wasn't trying to breathe anymore. She was still glaring as if she wanted to

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run me through a grinder, but when I got up and took a step toward the door, her eyes didn't move. So I knew she was dead, and I ought to call the nurse or something, but I didn't."

Rab fell silent at that point, and Bruce said, "What did you do?"

"I just went out. Out of room, and out of the Intensive Care Wing, and out into the corridor. It was a pretty long corridor, and I had to walk, oh, maybe a hundred steps before I came to the waiting room. It was late by then, and there was only one person in it, and that one person was me."

Rab gave us a chance to say something, but neither of us did.

"I don't mean I went in. I didn't. I just stood out in the corridor and looked inside. And there I was, sitting in there. I had on a black turtleneck and a whiskey-colored suede sports jacket. I remember that, because I've never owned those clothes. It was my face behind my glasses, though. It was even my haircut. He — I — was reading *Reader's Digest* and didn't see me. But I saw myself, and I must have stood there for five minutes just staring at him.

"Then a nurse pushed past me and said, 'You can go in and see your aunt now, Mister Sammon.' He put down his magazine and stood up and said, 'Call me Rab.' And she smiled and said, 'You can see your Aunt Elspeth now, Rab.'

"I stepped out of the way and the nurse and I went past me and down the corridor toward the Intensive Care Wing. I watched till they had gone through the big double doors and I couldn't see them anymore. Then I went into the waiting room and picked up that copy of the *Reader's Digest* that I had laid down and slipped it into my pocket, and went home and went to bed. I still have it, but I've never gotten up the nerve to read it."

Rab sighed. "That's my story. I don't imagine that yours will be true — I know both of you too well for that. But mine is."

"When you woke up in the morning, was your aunt still dead?" Bruce wanted to know.

Rab said, "Yes, of course. The hospital called me at work."

That bothered me, and I said, "When you started telling us about this, you said that there was a message from the hospital on your answering machine when you got home from the office. So the hospital didn't have your number there, presumably at least."

Rab nodded. "I suppose he gave it to them."

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Nobody said much after that, and pretty soon we undressed and got into our sleeping bags. When we had been asleep for two or three hours, Rab screamed.

It brought me bolt upright, and Bruce, too. I sat up just in time to see Rab scream again. Then he blinked and looked around and said, "Somebody yelled. Did you hear it?"

Bruce was a great deal wiser than I. He said, "It was an animal, Rab. Maybe an owl. Go back to sleep."

Rab lay back down, and so did I; but I did not go back to sleep. I lay awake looking at the clouds, the moon, and the stars, and thinking about that midnight hospital waiting room in which the man who stood outside sat reading a magazine, the wondering just how much power the recently dead may have to twist our reality, and their own.

There actually was something shrieking up on the bluff, but I cannot say with any confidence what it was. A wildcat, perhaps, or a cougar.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED

As the next millennium approaches like an overloaded ocean liner, fat with metaphor and passengers, many will attempt to peer through the veil of foggy futurism, sighting fresh continents of the mind.

Beyond that magical number 2000—for purists, 2001—some will try to do linear extrapolations from current trends. Others will assume, like southern Californian weather forecasters, that tomorrow will be pretty much like today, only more crowded.

Alas, it cannot be so. Our society is driven by high rates of technological change and exploding social ideas, so powerfully that stasis in any arena is impossible—indeed, inconceivable. One idea that shall surely not survive this century (perhaps to be nostalgically recalled as the mythic TwenCen, as language compresses under cyber-pressure) is that of the readily foreseeable future.

Many future thinkers, especially sf writers, are now less interested in making straightforward predictions of the future, and thus in helping determine it, precisely because they do not believe that linear, programmatic determinism is the right angle of attack.

Their views of that future are often playful, seeking to achieve an almost impressionistic effect, imagining small scattered details of a future that imply more than they can say. This approach allows one to seek the most vibrant metaphors while cocking a wary eye at society's many looming problems.

Clearly we have come a long way from unblinking wonder at technology, distancing ourselves from the top-down social engineering doctrines that accompanied the optimism of the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

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Virginia Postrel, author of 1998's *The Future and its Enemies*, argues that the essential political differences today are between stasists and dynamists. Sf sides with futures run not by Wellsian savant technocrats but by the masses, innovating from below and running their own lives, thank you very much.

This gathering belief in dynamic change driven by freedom and information flow contrasts with the oddly static tone of much earlier thinking. Mundane literature has carried an unspoken agenda, assuming that the present's preoccupations stand for eternal themes.

Even early sf presumed that elites should rule and that information should flow downward, enlightening the shadowed many. Sf's Shakespeare, H. G. Wells, was welcomed to speak by the Petrograd Soviet, the Reichstag, Stalin and both Roosevelt presidents. This company never doubted their managerist agendas, and Wells had his own.

Today, such mechanistic self-confidence seems quaintly smug. The genre looks to more vibrant metaphors, while cocking a wary eye at our many looming problems.

Sf writers are less interested in predicting and thus determining the future. They see themselves more as conceptual gardeners, planting for fruitful growth, rather than engineers designing eternal, gray social machines.

What does this portend for the next century? Clearly the TwenCen has been the century of physics, just as the nineteenth was that of mechanics and chemistry. Grand physical measures still beckon. We could build a sea-level canal across Central America, explore Mars in person, use asteroidal resources to uplift the bulk of humanity. Siberia could be a fresh frontier, better run by American metaphors than the failed, top-down Russian ones. (In fact, the U.S. is the only power that knows how to build and run a frontier. Siberia would be a natural for us.) Our world will continue to be shaped by new physics-based technologies.

But that won't be where the main action lies.

Imagining how science and technology could affect society now more often employs the self-organizing principles popular in biology, economics, artificial intelligence, and even physics. Rather than use monolithic ideas or institutions, we seem poised to employ smaller, more interactive scales. Market competition ideas echo Darwinian

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evolution. Order, even wholly new species, arise from individual mutations that propagate. In such distant scientific realms as fluid turbulence, small eddies build into larger ones through competition among whorls.

In our own brains, somehow the firing of synapses blends into a storm of electrical signals that organize into ideas or emotions—emergent order. Many phenomena display properties that grow from below in ways science does not fathom.

I've argued before that the 21st century will be the Biological Century. We will gain control of our own reproduction, cloning and altering our children. Genetic modification is surely a dynamist agenda, for the many mingled effects of changed genes defy detailed prediction. Although the converging powers of computers and biology will give us much mastery, how such forces play out in an intensely cyber-quick world are unknowable, arising from emergent properties, not detailed plans.

Despite our impulses to control the shadowy future landscape, to know the morrow, it will be increasingly hard to do so in the years to come.

* * *

The most infamous attempt to predict the economic and social future was the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* (1972). Based on a computer model of the interaction of various global socioeconomic trends, the work foresaw only exponential population growth and dwindling natural resources, allowing for no substitutions or innovation. A famous bet over the projected price of metals in 1990 led to the Club's public debacle—copper became cheaper, not the fought-over commodity predicted.

Although the oil crisis of the 1970s lent the work credence, resource markets have since erased the gloomy, narrow view of how dynamic economies respond to change. (Not that oil won't get precious. World production will peak around 2010, and prices will rise steadily thereafter. Sell your SUV soon!)

Rather than looking at the short run and getting that wrong, we should consider peering beyond immediate concerns, tracing long-run ideas that do not necessarily parallel the present. A historical example of this approach is the Irish-born physicist J. D. Bernal's *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*, which examined the long-term prospects of science and society in terms

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that seemed bizarre in 1929 but resonate strongly today: engineered human reproduction, biotechnology, and our extension into totally new environments such as the deep oceans and outer space.

Another, rather enjoyable way to regard the future is to listen to scientists thinking aloud in a long perspective, making ranging forays into territories seldom illuminated coherently in our era of intense narrowness. Prediction is speculation, normally frowned upon in science, and thus it often arrives well-disguised. Sometimes it is a short-term claim to a notion awaiting exploration, as when James Watson and Francis Crick, in the last sentence of their 1953 paper reporting the discovery of DNA's double helix, laconically noted that they saw its implications for reproduction: "It has not escaped our notice that the specific pairing we have postulated immediately suggests a possible copying mechanism for the genetic material."

In similarly laconic British tradition is a slim tome of a stature comparable to Bernal's, Freeman Dyson's *Imagined Worlds* (1997). In his lofty view Dyson, an English physicist, shares an advantage with science-fiction writers. Both are good at lateral thinking—the sideways swerve into future scenarios not justified by detail, but by their intuitive sweep. Refusing to tell us how we may get to their visions, Dyson and others take in a wider range of possibility than the hampered futurologists. As Dyson wrote: "Science is my territory, but science fiction is the landscape of my dreams."

Yet another way to broaden the vista of prediction beyond the consensus is to recognize that the future will always deal us a few wild cards. An unlikely, but not impossible, fundamental discovery or development, or some strange combination—particularly when coupled with the vagaries of human behavior—can send the future veering from its expected course.

We need look only to our own recent technological history to know that big surprises are in store. As late as the 1950s no one, not even the most prophetic science-fiction writers, foresaw solid-state microelectronics and the personal computer revolution that it would bring. In the 1920s and '30s, who anticipated that genetic resistance to those new antibiotic wonder drugs and our indiscriminate use of them would end our rosy expectations for the quick conquest of bacterial infection? Using intuition, educated guessing, random choice—whatever means we wish—we can

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focus on some of those potential wild cards, imagining their effects on the future. In so doing, we expand into the realm of the unexpected, where the improbable may become extremely salient, and sf is a favored tool.

Physics Today, April 2008
QUANTUM
TELEPORTATION IN THE LAB
...teams in Italy showed large-scale transport of quantum information about objects instantaneously to distant points, using *entanglement*, a connection between separated objects, long known as a purely theoretical feature of quantum mechanics. The achievement has profound implications for fast computing, and the concept of instantaneous communication is no longer the fantasy that physicists once believed...

International Electronics Industry, MacroWeb Edition, July 19, 2011
QUANTUM CHIP
BEATS COMPETITION
Simulation of Human Brain on a Thumbnail Promises Compact Computing, "Smart World"

Chicago Tribune, May 22, 2027
THIEF "WALKED THROUGH
WALLS" GUARD SAYS
FBI Questions Top Scientists
...may have employed an application of what Einstein once dismissed as "spooky action at a distance," according to University of Chicago physicist Andreas Nikolas. The entire wave function of even large objects apparently can be "entangled" with a state that exists on the other side of a wall. The object in this case would be the woman who, as witnesses described, passed through the wall of the ultra-secure AT&T Intel vault and made off with several thousand state-of-the-art carbon-based microchips. After emptying the vault, said Nikolas, the thief would then have had to entangle herself in another wave function outside the building in order to leave. An FBI spokesperson said that the agency has not even begun considering how such "quantum crimes" might affect future security measures...

As humans we suffer from contradictory demands: our biologically ordained decade-scale thinking contrasts with our social inertia, which requires a century to change. Nearly all our thinking is bounded within ten years, although the true agents of change, new institutions and new technologies, take longer than ten years to grow. Within the next decade, foreseeable advances include a flowering of digital astronomy, completion of the Human Genome Project, and the sequencing of DNA from many creatures, especially ourselves.

Single technologies can domi-

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nate over the scale of a century, but no more, and Dyson guesses that the next century will dance to the songs of petroleum scarcity, computers and biochemistry, plus the two newcomers, genetic engineering and artificial intelligence. Combining these last two alone could give us fresh variants on humans or animals, with microchip-augmented abilities. Such creatures would lie outside any linear mode of our thinking, introducing objects of amusement, wonder, or horror—or all three.

Nature, Vol. 468, December 16, 2010
BEHAVIORAL GENETICS FOR THE COMMON MAN
Recently developed procedures for identifying the genes responsible for specific behaviors in animals has now been complemented by a fully automated laboratory technique, announced by BritGen last week, that allows mapping of genetic instructions for advanced abilities, such as programmed seeking, into lower-order organisms and recombinant artificial life forms...

Financial Times, February 13, 2018
STARTUP BIOTECH FIRM ROLLS OUT LIVING BATH MAT
Can Ease Cleaning Chores, Lives on Soap & Human Dander

Daily National Enquirer, October 29, 2018
"SMART RUG" ESCAPES
Engineered for Home Scrubbing, Living Cleaner Takes to Woods Rangers, Police Reassure Public: "We'll shoot on sight."

The street finds its own uses for things, as TwenCen writer William Gibson remarked.

Obviously we have yet to witness the full implications of our fast-evolving computers. Combining the present sensor revolution—the ability of machines to register their surroundings and react—with ever-cheaper computer chips will surely animate our future.

The first changes, coming in a decade or two, will be mild. Appliances will go far beyond obeying voice commands and respectfully replying. Ovens will not merely run and stop; they will know how long to heat a casserole or bake a cake without being told, or at least without being told more than once. Robotic vacuum cleaners will use microwave radar to avoid the walls and furniture. Set to operate when electrical rates are lowest, they will also save energy and money by not overcleaning.

Similarly, clothes dryers will run only until the clothes are dry,

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and washing machines will know how much hot water to use for a load of cotton sheets. Onboard software will allow washers to talk to the embedded chips of the smart clothes loaded into them. When we wear these clothes, the same chips will sense temperature and send signals to the reactive fabric, which then will adjust itself to suit our personal comfort settings.

There is no reason why a full-blown computer will not be wearable, too, perhaps as a fanny pack with a small keyboard fitted to the wrist. Wearable computers will be in especially high demand for people such as doctors, emergency service workers, and real estate agents—those who need immediate information but cannot be tied to a desk or accept the reduced mobility of a laptop.

Built-ins—computers implanted in the body—will start out as specialized physiological monitors, say, of metabolic waste for kidney patients or blood-oxygen levels for deep-sea divers, but then they will find myriad applications, real and trivial. For simpler tasks a built-in "social secretary" with a small camera (or a direct tap into the optic nerve. You could recognize that vaguely familiar person we might bump into at an office party. It could provide not only the right name but also a short biography, enabling us to ask without a pause, "Say, Fred, how's that daughter doing at Caltech?"

We often think that the future belongs to the glitzy professions. Nevertheless, manual labor also will be altered by the changes to come, including the role of the farmer.

New Scientist, May 2, 2020
CAN WE BECOME QUEEN OF THE HIVE?

As a consortium of corporate labs in Brazil and Germany rush to complete the Honeybee Genome Project, a new era is dawning in our genetic understanding of the social insects.

Consider a field of maize (corn, to Americans). At its edge a black swarm marches in orderly, incessant columns.

These long lines of ants carry a kernel of corn each. Others bear bits of husk. In some places entire teams coagulate around chunks of cob. The streams split, kernel-carriers trooping off to a ceramic tower, climbing a ramp, and letting their burdens rattle down into a sunken vault. Each returns dutifully to the field. Another, thicker stream

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spreads into rivulets that leave their burdens of scrap at a series of neatly spaced anthills. Dun-colored domes with regularly spaced portals, for more workers.

These had once been leaf-cutter ants, content to slice up fodder for their own tribe. They still do, pulping the unneeded cobs, stalks, and husks, growing fungus on the pulp deep in their warrens. They are tiny farmers in their own right. Biotechnology, however, has genetically engineered them to harvest and sort first for the human masters, processing corn right down to the kernels.

Other talents can be added. For example, acacia ants naturally defend their home trees, weeding out nearby rival plants, attacking other insects that might feast on the acacias. Take that ability and splice it into the corn-harvesters, and we do not need pesticides or the drudge human labor of clearing the fields.

Can the acacia ants be wedded to corn? It does not seem an immense leap. Ant species are closely interrelated and multitalented. Evolution gave them a wide, adaptable range.

Following chemical cues, they seem the antithesis of robotic machinery, though insects are actually tiny automatons engineered by evolution, the engine that favors fitness. Why not co-opt their ingrained programming, then, at the genetic level and harvest the mechanics?

Some human farmers will be insect tenders, more like beekeepers than tillers of the soil. Others will find their livelihood threatened.

The Hindu (Orbital Stations Edition), October 31, 2043

AMERICAN FARM-WORKER UNIONS PROTEST "STRIKE-BREAKER BUGS"

Mexican Immigrants Return Home—"No Work Here"

The Achilles heel of predictions is that we have as much difficulty foreseeing the limitations of a technology as its promise.

A 19th-century dreamer might easily generalize from the newly invented "wireless" to envision the sending of not merely messages by radio waves but also cargoes and even people. Matter, after all, is at bottom a *message*, since it can be turned into energy and propagated. Nevertheless, the awesome radio did not develop into a matter transmitter, which is no closer to reality than it was a century ago.

Undoubtedly, then, some of

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these analogy-dreams will not come true, particularly in their timing. It seems likely that, despite the current fashion for nanotechnology — artifice on the scale of billionths of a meter, the molecular level — biotechnology will come first. The latter is easier to implement, because the tiny "programs" built into life forms have been written for us by nature and tested in her remorseless lab.

In fact, some of the more intriguing prospects for nanotechnological applications derive from our knowledge of the characteristics of biological materials. For example, one of the basic mysteries in biology is how the linear chemical structure of a protein molecule specifies the way that it will wrap itself into a unique three-dimensional shape, which in turn determines its biological function.

Tekno-Squint Mag, September 2035

...came as essentially a surprise to molecular biologists when the protein-folding problem was solved last year in a series of elegant experiments in microgravity aboard the International Space Station. The scientific community was at first skeptical of the concept that proteins, like growing plant shoots, somehow sense the Earth's downward pull and orient themselves accordingly. With general acceptance of the idea, however, came a quick and simple algorithm for predicting the spatial configuration of any protein from its amino-acid sequence...

An obvious long-chain molecule to fold and use as a construction material is DNA, which, given the appropriate molecular machinery, can make more copies of itself. A self-replicating "bio-brick" could be as strong as any plastic. By adding bells and whistles at the molecular level, through processes of DNA alteration, we could then make intricately malleable substances, capable of withstanding a lot of wear and able to grow more of itself when needed.

It is not fundamentally absurd to consider sidestepping the entire manufacturing process for even bulky, ordinary objects, like houses. We have always grown trees, cut them into pieces, and then put the boards back together to make our homes. Someday we may grow rooms intact, right from the root, customized down to the doorsills and window sizes. Choose our rooms, plant carefully, add water and step back. To do fix-ups, simply paint the house with a solution that feeds the self-repairing functions.

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Believe It! MacroMesh site (for trans-Mars and deep-ocean distribution), April 1, 2099

VAGRANT TRAPPED IN DYNAGROW HOME

"Didn't Know He Was In There"

Beijing Developer Claims

How to Get Him Out of Wall?

House Has Become His Body

Whether such dreams ever happen, it seems clear that using biology's instructions will change the terms of social debate.

The rate of change of our conception of ourselves will probably speed up from its presently already breakneck pace. The truly revolutionary force in modern times has been science, far more so than the usual "radical" politics.

Birth control pills changed social relations far more than edicts from the state. Cars and the Internet enhanced the flow of people and information that institutions as varied as corporations and police sought to control.

Nevertheless, many of the above examples underline the implications of leaving genetic choices to individuals. Society has some voice in defining boundaries, but typically we arrive at consensus only slowly, while biotechnology speeds ahead. Perhaps we are poised at the start of a profound alteration in the essential doctrine of modern liberal democratic ideology. There may be genetic paths we will choose to block. How do we recognize them, quickly?

Our species has made enormous progress through swift cultural evolution. Now, that quick uptake on changing conditions can come also from deliberate genetic alterations. We will hold the evolutionary steering wheel, however shaky our grip, and no longer rely on pitiless, random mutation.

We will emerge from the Biological Century with a profoundly different worldview. Our prospect is both wondrous and troubling. It is as though prodigious, bountiful nature for billions of years has tossed off variations on its themes like a careless, gushing Picasso. Now nature finds that one of its casual creations has come back with a piercing, searching vision and has its own pictures to paint.

The most difficult of all predictions is how all these social and scientific forces will intermingle, yielding a world as different from ours as we are from the optimistic security of 1900.

One thing is certain: the ride will be interesting.

Hold onto your hat.

Comments welcome at gbenford@uci.edu.

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Carol Emshwiller's debut in these pages was "The Coming" in our May 1957 issue. Strange but true, her most recent story for us was "But Soft, What Light..." in our April 1966 issue. Her presence in F&SF seems disproportionately large. Perhaps that's because her husband Ed was our most prolific artist with seventy covers to his credit, or maybe it's because stories like "Pelt," "Baby," and "Day at the Beach" are so distinctive and potent; a Carol Emshwiller story isn't likely to get mistaken for anyone else's work. It's nice to offer you this offbeat science fiction story.

Acceptance Speech

By Carol Emshwiller

NOBLE POETS OF THE consortium:

You have conferred upon me your highest honor, you have called me, in your own words, Most Noble of the Noble (though "words" is hardly the proper way to refer to what you call your parts of speech, so, rather, your syllables, your prefixes, your signs and signals); and I have already made the accepting gestures as well as I can manage them.

Now, in order to know your strange yet "Humble Master" better, you have asked for my alien view of the story of how I came to be your leader. I will tell you.

I came here, as you all know, as a mere specimen — a spot — a "speck," as you have called me; kidnapped from my world. I jumped through the right door on the first try — ran the maze, jumped to the proper ledge, escaped pain (at least for the moment). Though our noses are not as keen as yours, I could smell the rot behind that door — the sea-like rot that seemed to me might mean freedom. It turned out to be a feeding trough. I did not eat. At least not then.

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But I have come to be a new meaning in your land, which is sweet to me to be and even more so because I will eat, now, nothing but the roots of lilies and the blossoms of squash, or, rather, what, on my world, would seem to be the equivalent of these things.

Here, not everything is strange to me. There are small things that might as well be cats. There are fish. The only difference is that they can fly as well through air as through water so one sees fish sitting in the trees preening themselves, which is a strange sight to me. The trees not unlike those from my own home world, though I've seen none taller than a tall man. The land, at least in this area, is flat and every few yards there is another stream to cross. This I've seen though not experienced. Before, I wasn't important enough to walk the land, and now I'm too important for it and will be carried along in a sort of upright barrel with a little tent over it in case it rains, which it often does.

It was my curls that started you off about me. Curls are rare among you. You call them "curls of the dreamers that come from having dreamed. Curls," as you say, "of creativity." It is by my curls that I came to be in the magnificent fat state I'm in now. It is by them that I have been raised up to this point. Now it will be my poems that will fly from your mastheads, hang over your doorways, be carried through your streets on banners, and worn across the tops of your caps.

You hadn't noticed my curls at first, but they grew long in my captivity, so that after a few months you knew that I must be a creature to be reckoned with. (I paid for a cool, perfumy drink — my first taste of such things as you drink every day — with my first poem, not knowing, then, its true value. Not even knowing that it was a poem.)

Suddenly you started with different sorts of tests, though whether tests or initiation, I'm still not sure. You don't speak to me of that other time before I wore the robes and ribbons of my station. Perhaps it's beneath my dignity to speak about it now, but now you'll not fault me for it because I have already had a poet's full share of punishment.

You began the new stage by throwing mud and rocks at me. I couldn't guess why. Sometimes it seemed inadvertent — almost like a tic of some sort. You weren't even looking toward my cage when you did it. Or I wasn't looking. Once I was hit on the head and didn't know it until I came to with a lump behind my ear. Why, I wondered, this change from mazes to cruelty?

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And you were saying "Confess," over and over. (I knew by then the syllables for it.) Confess what? Then there came a series of small annoyances: tacks on the floor of my cage, crumbs on my pallet, rotten things in my soup, shells in my nuts, hulls in my grains. "Confess. Admit," is all you would say. I had no idea what to confess to, and, as my curls grew yet longer, you became more and more frantic. I began to be able to tell your moods by the way your ears lay (flat against your hair if you were angry) and by the way your tails flipped from side to side.

Being a poet is knowing when to stop.

Being a poet is knowing when to begin.

(*You* said these.)

I finally discovered, through dint of your training, that I did, after all, have the knack of the contemplation of the absolute. Though, at first, the concept of the absolute escaped me utterly, you lived by it every day. The syllables for it were your favorite syllables. The absolute, you said, is where and what all science comes from. It took me many hard lessons to come to terms with that and to answer, as was so often called for: "Absolutely."

But I began with: Ab, baa, baa, ab, ab, baa, and after those first bits I got myself the drink, but then my cage was tipped up over a puddle and I fell out and landed in the mud. Unwashed, just as I was, I was tied to a pole and carried to the poets palace and taken in through a small back door. Hooded poets came. "Sing," they said. All I knew was my, "Ab, baa, baa," but now it wasn't enough. I tried: "Cha, poo, tut," and was told to go back to ab and yet ab was wrong. I was pinched and pulled and slapped at until, three days later, I could answer properly with: "Ab-so-lu-la-la,"and when I could answer with the "word" for poet in all its syllables as we, in my homeland might say: "Po-et-ti-ca-la-la" — when I could say these two, I was taken to the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, he who is called The-Uncertained-Among-the-Certained, and also sometimes The-Certained-Among-the-Uncertained. Not as I was, all muddy and red, but washed and dressed in a backless robe of your form of silk, with the worms that made it still attached here and there so that all could see what it was woven of and marvel. I didn't know then why it had no back to it.

I was not allowed...of course not allowed to actually see the president of poems who talked to me from behind a screen. He, however, could see

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me, and from there could reach out with his whip and snap it over my head with a great snap, or let it fly onto my back, in which case it made, instead, a flat, slapping sound.

"Sing," he would say, and I would answer, "Ab-so-la-la," but by then, that was wrong.

In this manner I learned your syllables and syntax. I learned the prefix for the poem and the suffix for happiness, and I learned to call the president of poems sometimes: Humble-Master-of-the-Names-of-Things, or sometimes: Humble-Master-of-the-Thingness-of-Things-that-Objects-Should-Speak-Through-Him. And I learned, whatever I wore, to bare my back in his presence or in the presence of any of you poets of the palace as a temptation to the whip. Yet, I must confess it, I still, even at this moment...I still don't know what a poem is, or how to find one, or which syllables make one up, or whether a syllable is part of one or belongs to a part of another entirely different poem.

The first poem of mine that hung from the flagpoles (and I still don't know why) was:

> Look for the tender. The tenders
> of the stock. Flocks
> of fish fly. By
> now they nest in the poet's curls. Whirl
> his thoughts like fish. Oh fly
> them by. And by.

After that poem, the screen was removed and I was allowed to see, at last, the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, his head of black curls going gray, his yellow eyes, his ears set forward in greeting.... It was he, then, who taught me to snap the whip, "Because," he said, "your syllables will travel at the speed of sound, sounding out over the whole world." "Snap," he said, and I would snap. "Sing," he said, and I would sing, and many's the time he stole my syllables and took them as his own and only let, as you would call them, the lesser of my syllables be taken as said by me, though, neither then nor now, do I know which are the lesser of my syllables and many that you say are lesser, I think otherwise, while those on the banners are those I would deny.

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"Don't think," he would tell me. "That way lies the false madness and not the true madness of the poem." But sometimes he said, "Think! Think, think, think," and I still don't know, I confess it, when to think and when to not think.

First, then, the poet's whip lashing out at me, and afterward, a long time afterward, the bed where he mothered me as only (as you say) poets can mother, fed me blossoms and let me recover, for a while, from poetry. By that time I had learned better than to repeat myself. By that time I was scarred and bruised, but knew not to stop talking when poems were being called for — not to let any line that might be turned and twisted and hooked onto another line or divided in that strange way of yours into even more nonsense than I'd thought it had — I learned not to let any such lines stay unsaid.

It was a long rest he (and you) gave me. And for all that time, not one single little poem or even syllable, not one suffix or prefix was allowed from me, though I had been beaten to the point that, whenever my vigilance relaxed, poetry would pop out of my mouth at random. The president, Humble-Master, shushed me and yet, even so, I saw him pressing down what I had said into his little clay tablet, quickly, with the long nails of his paws. (You had let my nails grow, too, by then, so that I could do that, though I was clumsy at it.)

Then it was that he (and you) were all kindnesses, but especially he the Humble-Master, waiting on me hand and foot (ear and tail as you would say) held the wine glass to to my lips, brushed back my curls. His ears always pricked forward now and his tail moved in a slow, contented back and forth. He waited by me even all night long. I could see his eyes glow when he was awake and watching me. I felt he liked me, perhaps even loved me, and I began to like him, too, though I could make out nothing about him. I could speak your syllables, but I understood nothing of anything, neither of poetry, nor of love, nor of liking. It seemed that, as I learned more, I understood less and less

But I lay back and rested, grateful for the care and only woke out of my happy dream of no more whipping, no more groveling, not even, anymore, to answer: "Ab-so-lu-la-lat-ly" — only woke up to my thoughts again the day he shaved my head...Cut off my curls and then shaved me. *He* did it. My (I thought of him as mine now) my president, my Humble-Master-of-

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the-Poem, did it all gently, as, now, he always was with me. Then he turned away and did the same to himself, cut his curls and shaved his head. After that he gave me the lick that was his kiss (on each of my eyelids) and motioned me to do the same to him. I felt the soft vulnerability of his closed eyes. Then he brought out a box for me and left me, for the first time — the first time on this world — completely alone. I had been watched and studied from the moment I came here and then tortured and then kept awake and kept talking and only now left alone, with a few blossoms strewn about the table (whether for decoration or a snack, I couldn't guess).

I knelt by the box and opened it. At first I couldn't tell what it was except that it was something to wear and that what lay on top of it was a helmet. The helmet was covered with a glassy, red enamel and the sign of the poet was on the front — not just the sign of any poet, but the sign of the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem...*his* sign was on the front of it, but one of my own short poems was written — embroidered, actually, along the red and white flag that feathered from the top and unfurled as I took the helmet from the box. My poem, all there in a long line: IF THE SOUND OF THE SNAP, THEN NO PAIN THEREFORE JOY.

The helmet exactly fit my now bald head. The ear holes had been moved from the top to the side in order fit my ears. Under the helmet was a breastplate exactly right for my strange, flat chest, jointed mitts that would fit my hands only, under them, penis sheath, leg guards. At the bottom of the box curled a whip, longer than any I had seen, and under it was a dagger, curved, with the sharpness on the inside, like a sickle. On the hilt was the sign for joy and the sign for the power of sparkling mirrors, and I knew that, just as the president, Humble-Master, was the poet called Uncertainties, I was to be the poet called Joy. I had never heard, among your poets, of a poet ever called Joy, and I have since learned that that is true, there are none, which is odd, for it seems to me that the joy when the sound of the whip comes snapping over your head is as much as any joy I've experienced here on your world, because when the blows fall upon your back it makes an entirely different sound. One would think it would have been written about, and often, but I suppose that's not your way.

I was left alone with these new things long enough to think about

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them, which I did. Then other poets from the palace came and dressed me in them.

"There is no future for you, Joy, nor any future for any of us, in a land where the president who is known as Uncertainties exists at the same time as you do. Now Joy must put an end to him."

I asked them the same question I'd asked *him* and that he would never answer: Why had I been raised up so high among them, from speck to where I was? They said it was not only because my curls were tight and tiny and stuck out around my face like a great amphitheater, but also because I had brought unusual and important things to poetry. "It would be a pity for poetry if your syllables were stopped," they said, "so be vigilant."

They belted my dagger about me, they coiled my whip over my shoulder, and led me to the arena, a place where I'd only heard poetry before, though I'd often wondered at the brown stains on the far wall. When I'd asked about them, you'd always answered that they were the stains of bad poems.

The fight, you told me, was to be fought to the sound of our poems, so that I and the president must never stop talking and never stop fighting. Also we must never turn our backs or grovel as that would change death to non-death for no one could kill a groveler. Then, if I had killed him, I was to put my ear on the ground and grovel one last time which would be the last forever. If the president, on the other hand, killed me, he'd not have to do that, having already, when he'd won and become the president, come to his last grovel.

You poets of the palace were to be our audience, and you sat on the tiers with your tablets on your laps, ready to write out the poems we would be saying to each other. Those in red robes were to be for me. Those in green were for he who had taught me everything I knew, who had nursed me, waited on me, drunk wine with me, and once gave me a handful of jade marbles.

"It's possible to win with the poetry," you told me, "and yet still die."

I wasn't one of you and I didn't fight as you were used to. I threw off my whip at once, for I wasn't good at it and didn't want the added weight. I took out my dagger right away, and you all made great barking sounds I had not heard you ever make before, though you said to each other that

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what I did was not against any of the rules. There was no rule about it because no one had thought to do that.

The president, Noble-Master, turned me and twirled me and forced me back with his whip. All skills I had never mastered. He did this over and over, but I kept coming in, each time trying some new way, and trying to grab his whip which he skillfully kept away from me. He could wind me up and turn me and throw me against the back wall until it was my blood that mixed with the older stains. Then he could unwind the whip so fast I couldn't grasp it and only got rope burns trying. I gave up on the whip and went, instead, after the poem that hung from his helmet on that long banner. (His poem read: THE ABSOLUTE IS FULL OF UNCERTAINTIES.) I jerked at it, and had his helmet off before he'd realized what I was doing. Again, it was obviously not something that any of you would have done.

For a moment the slow intonations of his fighting poem stopped and his own side called to him that time was running out for the sound of the next syllable.

His neck was bared to me now, and yet he stood still, shocked, and I stood still, too. Finally he spoke, and, according to the timers, just in time. "To the uncertainty of death," he said, "I'm sending Joy, poet from the lesser world." I, at the same time, was saying, "I have learned to like you," and, at that moment, as he stood, still dazed, I came out of my own shock. And cut off his tail.

There was a roar of rage from all of you. It was clear that nothing of the sort had ever happened before. In my mind it had been that or his head, and I decided, at the last moment that I wouldn't — couldn't try to kill him.

He turned, then, dagger out, and fought me with a rage I'd never seen in him in all the time that I had spoiled syllables. He was so angry he lost all skill and flailed out, scratching at me and even biting. His poem fell apart to mere mouthings. "Not done...not to be considered"...and that there, "Couldn't be a president with only half a tail. Might as well," he said, "be without ears." At which point I clipped the left one off. At this, he fell and groveled. He wasn't dead, but he said he could never again rule poems. "I'm as good as dead," he said, but I said, "No. You're my poet. If no one else's, then mine."

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"If it comes from your mouth," you all said — "If it comes from the mouth of Joy, the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, then it must be."

And that is how I came to be here before you, making accepting gestures, being the six hundred and twelfth poet to become president, and here, my friend and servant, still alive — though in his own mind only half so, having lost all but one way of greeting you, and all but one way of showing pleasure — yet, to me, alive and singing, the even humbler master, the poet, Uncertainties, and, as I am also, sure of only a few small things.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THE TEMPTATION TO BLARE "You ain't seen nothin' yet" in this column is great, but of course we hope you have seen *somethin'* by now. Howsoever, we want you to rest assured that we've got lots of great things planned for days ahead.

The lead story in our December issue is a novella by Eleanor Arnason entitled "The Actors." Set in the same *Hwarth* world of her recent novels, the story examines gender roles from an unusual perspective.

Also on schedule for December is Steve Rasnic Tem's creepy "Tricks and Treats," a ghastly tour down Halloween Street. We also expect to have Scott Bradfield's "Dazzle Redux" next month, along with columns from Charles de Lint, Kathi Maio, and our new book reviewer James Sallis.

We can predict with great accuracy that in the year 2000 we will bring you stories from Brian W. Aldiss, Ray Bradbury, Orson Scott Card, Amy Sterling Casil, Bradley Denton, Esther Friesner, James Morrow, and Robert Reed, to name but a few in alphabetical order. We'll also be bringing you stories by writers like Susan Palwick, Jeffrey Ford, and the aforementioned Scott Bradfield who are new to our pages. Perhaps some of these writers will ultimately contribute to our centenary anniversary issue; we certainly intend to have fun en route to the answer.

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Lucius Shepard's first F&SF *story, "Solitario's Eyes," was the cover story for our September 1983 issue. Throughout the 1980s, we had the good fortune to publish many of his lush and lyrical stories — "The Night of White Bhairab," "Salvador," "The Jaguar Hunter," and "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule," to name a few. His last appearance here was "The Ends of the Earth" ten years ago and it's awfully nice to welcome him back with this herpetologist's tale.*

Crocodile Rock

By Lucius Shepard

YOU MUST NOT THINK OF me as a reliable witness, as someone immune to bias and distortion. Every story, of course, should by rights be introduced by such a disclaimer, for we are none of us capable of a wholly disinterested clarity; but though it is my intention to relate the truth, I am persuaded by the tumult of my recent past to consider myself a less reliable witness than most.

For several months prior to receiving Rawley's phone call, I had been in a state of decline, spending my grant money on drink and drugs and women, a bender that left me nearly penniless and in shaky mental health. It seems that this downward spiral was precipitated by no particular event, but rather constituted a spiritual erosion, perhaps one expressing an internalized reflection of war, famine, plague, all the Biblical afflictions deviling the continent — it would not be the first time, if true, that the rich miseries of Africa have so infected an expatriate. Then, too, while many American and overseas blacks speak happily of a visit to the ancestral home, a view with which I do not completely disagree, for me it

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was an experience fraught with odd, delicate pressures and a constant feeling of mild dislocation — these things as well, I believe, took a toll on my stability. Whatever the root cause, I neglected my work, traveling with less and less frequency into the bush, and sequestered myself in my Abidjan apartment, a sweaty little rat's nest of cement block and stucco with mustard-colored walls and vinyl-upholstered furniture that would have been appropriate to the waiting room of a forward-thinking American dentist circa 1955.

The morning of the call, I was sitting hung over, watching my latest live-in girlfriend, Patience, make toast. Patience was barely two weeks removed from her home village; city ways were still new and bright to her, and though she claimed to have previously observed the operation of a toaster, she'd never had any hands-on experience with the appliance. Stacks of buttered toast, varying in color from black to barely browned, evidence of her experiments with the process, covered half the kitchen table. The sight of this lovely seventeen-year-old girl (the age she claimed), naked except for a pair of red panties, staring intently at the toaster, laughing when the bread popped forth, breasts jiggling as she laboriously buttered each slice, glancing up every so often to flash me a delighted smile...it was the sort of thing that once might have stimulated me to insights concerning cultural syncretism and innocence, or to a more personal appreciation of the moment and my witness of it. Now, however, this sort of insight only made me feel weary, despairing of life, and I had grown too alienated to keep a collection of intimate mental Polaroids — and so I was glad when the ring of the telephone dragged me away into the living room.

"My God, man!" Rawley said when I answered. "You sound awful." His tone became sly and knowing. "What *can* you have been doing with yourself?"

"Business as usual," I said, more brusquely than I'd intended. "What's on your mind?"

A pause, a burst of static along the long distance wire, after which Rawley's voice seemed tinier, flatter, less human. "Actually, Michael, I've some work to toss your way...if you're interested. But if this is a bad time...."

I apologized for being short with him, told him I'd had a rough couple of nights.

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"Not to worry," he said, and laughed. "My fault for calling so early. I should have remembered you're a bit of a cunt before you've had your coffee."

I asked what kind of work he was talking about, and there was another pause. A radio was switched on in the adjoining apartment; a soukous tune blasted forth, lilting guitars and Sam Mangwana chiding an unfaithful lover. From the street came the spicy smell of roasting meat; I was tempted to look out the window and see if a vendor had set up shop below, but the brightness hurt my eyes, and I closed the blinds instead.

"I've been put in charge of a rather curious case," Rawley said. "It's quite troubling, really. We've had some murders up in Bandundu Province that have been attributed to sorcery. Crocodile men, to be specific."

"That's hardly unusual."

"No, no, of course it isn't. Not a year goes by we don't have similar reports. Sorcerers changing into various animals and doing murder. Although this year there've been considerably more. Dozens of them. Hang on a second, will you?"

I heard him speaking to someone in his office, and I pictured him as I had seen him three months before — blond Aryan youth grown into a beefy, smug, thirtyish ex-swimmer given to hearty backslapping and beery excess. Or, as a remittance man of our mutual acquaintance had described him, "...halfway through a transformation from beautiful boy to bloated alcoholic."

"Michael?" Patience stood in the kitchen doorway; the room behind her was wreathed in smoke.

"The bread won't come out the slots." She said this sadly, her head tilted down, gazing up at me through her lashes — an attitude that suggested both penitence and sexual promise.

"I'll be there in a minute," I told her. "Just pull the plug out of the wall."

"Sorry about that, Michael." Rawley was back, his manner more energized, as if he'd received encouraging news. "This particular case I mentioned. We have a witness who's identified three men and two women he claims turned into monsters. Half man, half croc. He says he saw them kill and eat several people."

I started to speak, but he cut me off.

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"I know, I know. That's not unusual, either. But this fellow's testimony was compelling. Described the beasties in great detail. Human from the waist up, croc from the hips down. Skin in tatters, as if they were undergoing a change. That sort of thing. At any rate, arrests have been made. Four of them deny everything. As you might expect. Under ordinary circumstances, I'd let them go. Despite the superstition rampant in these parts, prosecuting a case based entirely on an accusation of sorcery would be a ludicrous exercise. But in this instance, one of the accused has confessed."

I had been stretching the phone cord to its full extension, peering around the corner of the doorway to see how Patience was doing with the toaster cord. Now Rawley had won my complete attention.

"He confessed to killing and eating people?"

"Not only that. He confessed to killing them while in the form of half man, half crocodile."

I took a moment to consider this, then said, "The police must have tortured him."

"I don't believe so. I've spoken with him in the jail at Mogado, and he's not in the least intimidated. On the contrary, I have the sense he's laughing at us. He seems amused that anyone would doubt him."

"Then he must be insane."

"The thought did occur. Naturally I had him examined by a psychiatrist. Clean bill of health. Of course, I'm not altogether sure of either my psychiatrist's competency or his motives. His credentials are not of the highest quality, and there's a great deal of political pressure being exerted to have the case brought to trial. The big boys in Kinshasa don't enjoy the notion that someone out in the provinces might be practicing more effective juju than they themselves."

"It all sounds intriguing," I said. "But I don't understand how I can help."

"I want someone I trust to have a look at this fellow. A practiced observer. Someone with expertise in the field."

"I'm scarcely an expert in human behavior. Certainly not by any academic standard."

"True enough," said Rawley. "But you do know a thing or two about crocodiles. Don't you?"

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This startled me. "I suppose...though I haven't kept up with the literature. Snakes are my thing. But what possible use can you have for an expert on crocodiles?"

Again Rawley fell silent. I had another peek in at Patience. She was sitting by the table, staring glumly out the window, the black toaster plug protruding from her clasped hands — like a child holding a dead flower. She did not turn, but her eyes cut toward me and held my gaze — the effect was disconcerting, like the way a zombie might glance at you. Or a lizard.

"I realize this may sound mad," Rawley said, "but Buma... That's the man's name. Gilbert Buma. He's an impressive sort. Impressive in a way I can't put into words. He has the most extraordinary effect on people. I...." He made a frustrated noise. "Christ, Michael! I need you to come and have a look at him. I can get you a nice consulting fee. We'll fly you into Kinshasa, pay all expenses. Believe it or not, there's a decent hotel in Mogado. A relic of empire. You'll be very comfortable, and I'll stand for the drinks. It shouldn't take more than a week." I heard the click of a cigarette lighter, the sound of Rawley exhaling. "C'mon, man. Say you'll do it. It makes an excellent excuse for a visit if nothing else. I've missed you, you old bastard."

"All right. I'll come. But I'm still not sure what exactly it is you want from me."

"I'm not entirely clear on the subject myself," said Rawley. "But for the sake of the conversation, let's just say I'd like you to give me your considered opinion as to whether or not Buma might be telling the truth."

PATIENCE WEPT when I left. We had only been together a few days, and our relationship had acquired no more than a gloss of emotional depth; yet judging by her display of tearful affection, you might have thought we were newlyweds torn apart in the midst of a honeymoon. I gave her enough money to last a couple of weeks and instructed her in the use of the apartment. Frankly, I didn't believe I would see her again; I assumed that I would return home to find the place trashed, and myself in need of a new toaster. The tears, I suspected, were the product of her fear at being left alone in the city, a situation she would address the minute I was out the door. But despite this cynical view, I was moved and tried to reassure her

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that everything would be fine. I told her I would call from Mogado and gave her Rawley's office number. Nothing served to placate her. As I rattled about in the cab on the way to the airport, peering out at dusty slums through the mosaic of decals and fetishes that almost obscured the rear window, I felt a twinge of remorse at leaving her so bereft, and I wondered if by conditioning myself to expect the worst of people, I had also blinded myself to their potentials. Perhaps, I told myself, Patience was something other than the typical village girl driven from home by poverty, on her way to death by knife or beating or STD; perhaps she was offering more than I had taken the trouble to notice. But the sentimentality of this idea was off-putting. I pushed it aside and turned my thoughts to what lay ahead, to Mogado and Gilbert Buma, and to Rawley.

My friendship with James Rawley had been launched under the banner of political correctness. Though not so obnoxiously pervasive as it had become in the States, the politically correct mentality was nonetheless in vogue during my year at Oxford, and I believe Rawley perceived that friendship with a black American would effect a moral credential that would immunize him against the stereotyping reserved for white Africans, thereby assisting his student career — and it was for him a career in the purest sense of the word, a carefully crafted accretion of connections and influence. I doubt he was aware of this choice; it was more a by-product of natural craftiness than of any conscious scheme. But I also doubt he would have denied the fact had I brought it to his attention — he had an intuitive self-knowledge and blunt honesty that made it difficult for him to harbor illusions regarding his motives. For my part, it was not so different. Rawley's acceptance helped to ease my path at Oxford, and though the artificial character of the relationship was always a shadow between us, we never discussed the subject; we had sufficient affinities and commonalties of interest to allow us to finesse this potential problem.

For a long while, I considered the friendship abnormal, and I suppose it was to a degree, since from its onset it had not been informed by real affection; but as I grew older, I came to recognize that friends, like lovers, have their honeymoons, and that affection, like passion, lasts only for a season unless sustained by concerns of mutual advantage. Rawley and I had manufactured a friendship based on those concerns without the attendant warmth; yet over the years, our orbits continued to intersect,

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and a genuine warmth evolved between us. It was as if because we had never bought into the illusion of friendship, because we had initiated our bond on the basest of levels, an enduring and dynamic friendship became possible. Whenever I stopped to analyze the relationship, I couldn't be certain that I even liked Rawley; yet time and experience had inextricably woven together the threads of our lives, and our dependency on one another for counsel, money, a shoulder to cry on, and so forth had grown so deep-seated, we might have been an old married couple.

Though I had never been to Mogado, I knew what to expect. All African provincial capitals are much the same, both in essence and particulars, and Mogado's downtown area of dusty, potholed streets, a scattering of leafless, skeletal trees, and shabby buildings with cracked stucco facades, was not in any wise distinctive. Just enough people about to give the impression of squatters in a ghost town: a barefoot woman in a faded dress peering from a dark doorway; three skinny kids squatting in the dirt, tormenting a captive mouse snake; a toothless old man sitting at a window, gazing blankly into the past. Everyone else hiding from the heat. In the central square, dominated by a plaster fountain decorated with faces from which all feature had eroded, a pariah dog with a pelt the color of blanched almonds was poking about for bugs in a patch of sere grass. When my car passed close to him, he skittered away sideways, dragging behind him a shadow as thin as a wire animal.

The street sign on the corner nearest the jail was dented and weathered, almost unreadable. Peering closely, I saw it was inscribed with a date; I could just make out the month, November, and the slightest suggestion of a numeral — doubtless commemorating some brilliant revolutionary passage whose spirit had suffered a comparable erosion of clarity. The jail itself occupied the basement and ground floor of the provincial offices, which were housed in a four-story edifice of pastel green stucco. A potbellied Congolese policeman with blue-black skin, a presidential air of self-importance, and a wen under his left eye sat in the anteroom behind a flyspecked desk, reading a French-language newspaper whose headline proclaimed a ferry disaster on the Kilombo River, the same muddy watercourse that flowed past Mogado. The crack-webbed wall at his back was figured by a large rectangle paler by several degrees

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than the remainder of its dingy surface; I took this to be the space where for three decades a portrait of the late unlamented dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, had hung. A ceiling fan stirred the air, but the faint breeze it created served merely to make me more aware of the humidity and the acrid stench of cleaning agents mixed in with a mustier scent, one I imagined to be that of blood and urine and sweat, the smell of old sufferings.

Rawley, the policeman told me, had been detained; he would join me that evening at the hotel. However, I could see the prisoner now if I wished.

I had presumed that Rawley would want to speak to me before my initial meeting with Buma; but now I suspected that his absence was by design, that he preferred to have my first impressions of the man be untainted by any further briefing on the case. I was tired from the flight and the drive, but I decided there was no point in putting things off.

A second policeman accompanied me down the stairs to a freshly whitewashed interrogation room at the rear of the building, furnished with a rough wooden table and two folding chairs. As I waited for Buma, I picked at the whitewash with my fingernails and succeeded in scraping away a sizable flake, revealing a dark undercoat dappled with rust-colored spots that were almost certainly dried blood. It would be nice, I thought, if Mobutu were doing time someplace a touch more tropical than Mogado, capering madly about in a red-hot iron cell, with snakes' heads protruding from his eyes and rats playing tug-of-war with bloody strips of his tongue.

The door creaked back, and the policeman, wearing an agitated expression, ushered an elderly white-haired man into the room and locked the door behind him. The man was dressed in a tattered shirt and trousers of flour sacking, his arms and legs in manacles. His head was down, and he did not look at me. He stepped behind the chair opposite, repositioned it so that it was sideways to the table, and sat, affording me a view of his left profile. Only then did he dart his eyes toward me, engaging my stare for a few beats before fixing his gaze on the wall. He smiled, showing a sliver of discolored teeth — or perhaps it was not a true smile, for the expression held, as if this were the natural relaxed position of his jaws. His skin was coffee-colored, so crisscrossed with wrinkles that I initially assumed him to be in his eighties; but his musculature gave the lie to this

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impression. His forearms and biceps were those of someone who had thrived on a lifetime of physical labor, and his features were firmly fleshed and strong. It seemed that age had merely laid a patina upon him, and that if you could erase the wrinkles, you would be face to face with a man of hale middle age.

"Mister Buma," I said. "My name is Michael Mosely. I'd like to ask you some questions."

He was slow to respond, but at length, as if it had taken several seconds for my words to penetrate his cerebral cortex, several more for the brain to interpret them, he said in a baritone of such resonance he might have been speaking through a wooden tube: "They tell me you are another doctor."

"Yes," I said. "But not the same sort of doctor who interviewed you previously. My discipline is herpetology. The study of snakes. To be precise, I'm an ethologist specializing in the behavior of pythons."

This appeared to interest him. He turned the full force of his liverish eyes on me — when I say "force," I am being literal, for I could have sworn I felt a sudden cold pressure on the skin of my face. That and his thin, false smile combined to instill in me a sense of unease.

"Pythons," he said, and gave an amused grunt. "You will learn nothing about pythons from me."

"As you probably know," I said, "that's not the subject of my inquiry."

He lifted his large head a few degrees and appeared to be studying something in the corner of the ceiling. The most interesting thing about him to this juncture, I thought, was his stillness. After each movement, he seemed to freeze, not a muscle or a nerve twitching, and I wondered if this might not be the symptom of some pathology.

"Where were you born?" I asked.

"Along the river. A few days from here."

"What's the name of your village?"

"It no longer exists," he said. "It has no name."

Mobutu, I thought. Under Mobutu, many things in the Congo had ceased to exist.

"I'm going to assume," I said, "you committed the murders you've been accused of. If that's the case, why did you confess?"

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He lowered his gaze to the wall. "Because I wished to announce myself. Because I am not afraid of what may follow."

From his answer, I thought I understood him. Either he had participated in the murders, or else they had been done by someone else, and he had seen them as an opportunity. He was a witch man. A member of a crocodile cult. He wanted an acknowledgment of his power; once that acknowledgment had been made, and the cult's authority affirmed, he believed that no Congolese court would have the courage to convict him — they would be intimidated by the threat posed by his sorcery. The entire process of accusation and confession had in effect been a public relations stunt designed to elevate the cult from a bush league operation, so to speak, to a place of honor in the complicated hierarchy of witches and sorcerers that had always flourished in the country, no matter what political regime occupied the halls of power. While Mobutu was in office, this sort of stratagem would have been met with swift violence — no one was permitted to practice greater juju than the president-for-life; but now, with lesser monsters in control, it stood a chance of success. What I didn't understand, however, was whether he was a con man or if he actually believed his own bullshit.

"Would you mind telling me how you acquired the ability to transform yourself?" I asked.

He seemed not to have heard me, continuing to stare at the wall.

I found this intriguing — it was my experience that most witch men would leap at an opportunity to present their magical credentials, to boast of their connections with various gods and elementals, to go on and on about the trials they had endured in their spiritual quests.

"The killings," I said. "Were they somehow related to the ritual that permitted you to transform yourself? Or were they merely...coincidental?"

He let out a heavy sigh, and his mouth remained open, as if it had been a last breath; but then he blinked, and his eyes cut toward me again.

"These questions," he said, "they hide another question. The thing you truly wish to know is whether I am a liar or a fool. If I were a fool, I would have no answer. If I were a liar, I would not tell you the truth."

"You underestimate yourself..." I began, but he gave a dismissive wave.

"I have no need to ask whether you are a fool," he said. "You claim

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to be a doctor who studies snakes, yet your questions are the same as that other fool's. You think to trick me into revealing myself. Yet you are such a great fool, you can't see that I have already done so."

"All men are fools one way or another," I said. "But I'm willing to accept your judgment. Why don't you enlighten me?"

To this point, his movements had been measured and slow, something I attributed to the weight of the manacles. Now he whirled about and brought both fists down upon the center of the table, splintering it. This movement was so quick and fluid, I did not even have time to flinch, but was frozen by the violence; and as he leaned toward me, pinning me with his angry yellow gaze, I realized that the manacles would not be much of an impediment should he choose to attack.

The policeman's voice came from beyond the locked door, asking if everything was all right. Before I could respond, Buma told him to leave us alone. Immediately thereafter, I heard footsteps in retreat along the corridor.

"I wonder what's gotten into him?" I said to Buma, tamping down the coals of an incipient panic. "Whatever you're trying to sell, it seems you've found at least one idiot who's swallowed it."

He said nothing, remaining motionless; but I sensed a trivial relaxation in his tense posture.

I shifted to a more comfortable position, trying to present an image of cool indifference. "You were going to say...?"

Buma dropped his eyes to the iron cuffs encircling his wrists; after a bit he let out another sigh and shifted back about to face the wall. "It would be best for you to return to Abidjan," he said.

I was for the moment confounded that he knew where I lived, but then realized there was an obvious explanation.

"I'm not impressed," I said. "It's likely that Mister Rawley told you about me. If not Rawley, then one of your guards."

This time, I thought, his peculiar thin smile was in actuality a smile. "If you travel upriver five days," he said, "you'll come to a place marked by a ferry landing that was burned by the soldiers. Walk into the jungle straight back from the landing until you see a giant fig tree. It's not far. There you will find what you have been seeking."

"And what exactly is that?"

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"A python," Buma said. "A white one."

I was almost certain I had told Rawley that I was searching for an albino rock python — a healthy specimen would be worth six figures, and if it could be bred, I could make even more from the first litter. The money would free me from writing more grant proposals, from tedious research. From Africa. Yet I couldn't imagine Rawley being so chummy with Buma that he would let slip this piece of information — if I had told him, I had done so only in passing; it would not have been in character for me to dwell on such a quixotic enterprise. Still, this was the only possible explanation.

"I suppose the snake's just hanging around the fig tree, waiting for me to catch it."

Buma shot me an icy glance. "If you go there, you will find it."

"Golly, thanks. I'll get right on it," I said. "And here I thought you told me I'd learn nothing about pythons from you."

"Then it seems you must assume I am a liar," said Buma. "Not a fool."

I had to laugh at this. Rawley had been right — the man was clever; but I remained convinced that everything about him, from his reptilian mannerisms to his cryptic dialogue, was part of an act. Better conceived than others I'd seen, but an act nonetheless.

"Do you truly want answers to your questions?" Buma asked.

"Of course I do."

He turned to me again, slowly this time, and gave me an assessing look; he nodded. "It will be difficult, but you may be able to understand," he said. "Very well." He reached out and clasped my right wrist with his left hand.

In reflex, I tried to pull away, but my hand might have been stuck in an iron wall — his strength was irresistible. He closed his eyes, squeezed my wrist until my fist opened; then he leaned forward and spat into my palm. With his free hand, he closed my fingers around the spittle, so that it smeared into the flesh.

"There," he said, releasing me. "My brothers and sisters will not harm you now."

"I thought you were going to answer my questions."

"Words can never convey the truth." he told me. "Truth must be revealed. And so it will be revealed to you."

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He settled back in his chair, let out a hissing sigh.

"That's it? That's your answer? The truth must be revealed?"

Buma's eyelids were half-closed; his chest rose and fell, but very, very slowly, as if he were asleep. "Tomorrow," he said in dusty, barely audible whisper. "We will talk more tomorrow."

THE TOWN WAS tucked into a notch between low green hills, beyond which lay deep jungle, and it stretched for nearly a quarter mile along the banks of the Kilombo, thinning out to the west into a district of thatched huts and shanty bars. Farther to the west, separated from this district by mud flats, lay the hotel Rawley had mentioned, the Hotel du Rive Vert, a venerable structure dating from the 1900s, when European traders had plied the river, exchanging cheap modernities for skins and ivory. The *rive* was no longer *vert*, the grounds having deteriorated into patches of parched grass crossed by muddy tracks, sentried here and there by dying, sparsely leaved eucalyptus. Standing isolate amid this desolation, the building itself, a rambling white stucco colonial fantasy of second-story balconies and French doors and a red tile roof, had the too-luminous incongruity of a hallucination, a notion assisted by the presence next to the front entrance of a lightning-struck acacia with a hollow just below its crotch that resembled an aghast mouth — it looked to be pointing at the hotel with a forked twig hand and venting a silent scream.

There was no sign of Rawley at the hotel, no message. The hotel bar, gloriously dim and cool and rife with mahogany gleam, was a temptation, but I didn't want to be drunk when Rawley arrived. I set out walking along the riverbank, thinking I might stop in at one of the shanty bars for a beer or two — no more than two. The beer, I thought, would provide a base for the heavier alcohol consumption that would likely ensue once Rawley and I finished our business and got down to reminiscence.

This was toward the end of the dry season, and while the better part of the days were sunny — as it was that day when I left the hotel — the late afternoon rains were lasting longer and longer, often well into night. The land was so thirsty that by mid-morning of the following day, the streets were parched again, and wind blew veils of dust up from the flats; but there was a new heaviness in the air, and in the mucky soil at the edge of the

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water, you could see shallow troughs where crocodiles had lain motionless during the downpour, steeped — or so I imagined — in a kind of bleak satisfaction, as if they believed that the mud and the river and the wet darkness were merging into a single medium, one perfect for their uses. Curiously enough, I did not see a single crocodile during the first portion of my walk. The flats reeked of spoilage and were strewn about with cattle bones and skulls, empty bottles, paper litter and fruit rinds; occasionally I passed a dead tree or a mounded puzzle of sun-whitened sticks and twigs that once had been a shrub of some sort. The river was a couple of hundred feet wide at this juncture, roiled and muddy, and the far side of the bank was occupied by secondary growth jungle, leached to a pale green by the summer drought — from it came the sound of a trillion exquisitely unimportant lives blended together into a seething hum, just audible above the idling wash of the water. Flies buzzed about my head, and at my feet I saw the delicate tracks of crabs. But no crocodiles, no significant animal life of any kind.

On rounding a bend, however, I was brought up short by the sight of more crocodiles than I could have reasonably expected. Less than ten yards from where I stood, a wide, flat spur of tawny rock extended out from the Mogado side of the bank some twenty-five feet over the river, and upon it, slithering atop one another, stacked almost to the height of a man, were dozens of crocs, perhaps more than a hundred. Hissing, snapping, exposing their ghastly discolored teeth, groping with their clawed feet for purchase. A great humping mass of gray-green scales and turreted eyes and dead white mouths. I backed off a few paces, daunted by the closeness of so many predators, and by the strangeness of the scene. Not that it was entirely strange. During droughts, it sometimes happens that crocodiles will crowd together like this, pressing against each other in order to snare whatever moisture might have collected on the hides of their fellows; but in this instance, the drought had passed, and there was abundant water available. As I watched, one of the crocs dropped off the pile and went with a heavy splash into the murky water. Instead of making its way back up onto the rock, which I would have expected, it allowed itself to be carried off downstream, barely submerged, letting the current take it sideways, rolling it over partway to expose its pale, slimed belly, as if the thing were dead or moribund. Soon other crocs followed suit. This behavior was

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strange, indeed. I could think of no reason for it, except perhaps that toxic chemicals were responsible.

Before long, several dozen crocodiles had gone into the water — the narrows just beyond the bend was thronged with bodies, but once past that point, the current picked up speed and scattered them out across the breadth of the river, carrying them along more smoothly, so it appeared they were all arrowing toward the same destination, like an amphibious hunting pack. The scene was disturbing, unsettling, and not simply because I had no good explanation for it. I could not, you see, accept that it had a rational explanation; there was about the crocs' actions a quality of purposefulness, of surreal functionality, that caused me to think I was witnessing something to which rationality as I knew it did not apply. Though I had been trained as an academic, I was not the sort to be troubled by slight shifts in the alignment of reality — my personal life had been fraught with lapses into substance abuse and depression and various other altered states. But this particular shift seemed to embody a powerful, unfathomable value that outstripped my experience, and I was shaken by it.

I had lost my taste for native beer, but not my thirst, and I hurried back to the hotel, where I immersed myself in a large whiskey, and in the illusion of Europe granted by the beveled mirror behind the bar, with its deep reflection of dark wood, candlelit tables, and plush red carpeting. Two whiskeys more, and the potential threat posed by afflicted crocodiles receded into a blurry inconsequentiality.

The barman, a slender, dignified East Indian named Dillip, with pomaded gray hair, and a crimson sash accenting his white shirt and trousers, was watching television at the end of the counter: a news program from Kinshasa. Bodies were being hauled from a river. I asked him if this footage related to the ferry disaster reported in the morning headlines.

"No, sah. Somebody just kill these boys and throw them in the Kilombo." He shook his head ruefully. "Mobutu."

Mobutu, I reminded him, was dead.

"Even dead, he make trouble for this place. Many people along the river were not his friend. They try to assassinate him." He started to unload cutlery from a dishwasher. "You see, sah, at the end Mobutu was crazy from his cancer and the drugs. He does many crazy things. One

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thing, he tell his sorcerer to lay a curse upon the river. And now every town, every village along the Kilombo is poisoned by it."

"Poisoned?"

"Yes, sah. They say the sorcerer take a scrap of Mobutu's spirit and send into the river. Now nothing good can happen here." He made a gesture of regret. "Nothing good can happen anywhere. You see, the Kilombo it flows into the ocean. And since the ocean goes everywhere, Mobutu's curse have poisoned all the waters."

Despite the woeful character of this information, he imparted it with the air of a man glad to be helpful to a stranger, as if warning of a dangerous stretch of road ahead. Thus do most Africans, be they black or white or any shade in between, approach the subject of sorcery — it is a simple conversational resource, no more extraordinary than talk of politics and the weather; and as is the case with those topics, though the news concerning sorcerous activity is generally bad, it's simply a fact of life, and nothing to get upset about.

I was about to ask Dillip more about Mobutu's relationship with the region, but Rawley chose that moment to put in an appearance. The next few minutes were occupied by a backslapping embrace and an exchange of crude pleasantries. And following that, I filled him in on my interview with Buma.

"So you think he's a talented thespian." Rawley had a sip of beer. "I must admit that was my impression at first. And perhaps first impressions are the most accurate in this instance. The longer I spoke with him, the more persuaded I was that something else was going on. Magic. Sorcery. That's why I wanted your opinion. Being born here makes me somewhat susceptible to these old frauds."

He didn't seem convinced of this, however.

"I want to talk to him again, if only to watch him work," I said.

"Yes, yes...absolutely. Talk to him as often as you like." Rawley gazed at his reflection in the mirror. On the face of things, he looked the same as always, but now I noticed that his trousers and polo shirt were rumpled, and his hair had been hastily combed — a far cry from his normal pathological neatness. Dark puffy half moons under his eyes gave evidence of sleeplessness, and his ruddy tan was undercut by the sort of pallor that comes with illness or overwork.

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"Fuck me," he said wearily, as if he'd heard my thoughts. "This business is sending me round my twist." He signaled Dillip, pointed to my empty glass, and held up two fingers. "I'm getting it from both ends. Kinshasa wants me to prosecute, but the locals are terrified that if I do, Buma's minions will slaughter them in their beds."

"Buma has minions?"

"He's never mentioned any. But then, as you yourself observed, he conveys a certain menace." The whiskeys arrived, and Rawley knocked back half of his; he lit a cigarette, leaned back and regarded me fondly. "I'm glad you're here, Michael. I really needed someone to get pissed with."

"Then it's not my vast wisdom you were interested in."

He laughed. "Strictly a ruse."

An accomplished drinker, Rawley knew how to pace himself for a long evening. Though I had a head start, I slowed my own pace and fell into his rhythm of sips and swallows, and before long we had achieved a relatively equal level of inebriation. Other patrons entered the bar. A distinguished, white-haired African gentleman in a dark blue suit sat alone at a corner table, sipping a brightly colored drink decorated with a tiny paper parasol, and stared into the middle distance. His face betrayed no expression, but I imagined I could hear the memory tunes playing in his head. A young French couple — fieldworkers with a relief agency — littered the opposite end of the bar with government forms and talked earnestly. Two bearded thirtyish men in jeans and T-shirts took a table by the door; they downed beer after beer in rapid succession, their mule-like laughter at odds with the atmosphere of colonial decorum. Germans, probably.

When not busy serving his customers, Dillip continued to watch the TV, which now offered a discussion amongst three government officials concerning the troubles along the Kilombo, and since Rawley and I had for the moment exhausted our store of reminiscences, I told him what Dillip had said about Mobutu and his curse.

"Yeah, I've heard that story," Rawley said. "It's true enough the region has been going through hell since he died. But it's impossible to tell which came first, the trouble or the story." With the tip of his forefinger, he smeared a puddle of moisture around on the polished surface of the bar. "The old boy was mad, there's no doubt of it. And not just at the end. When

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I was a boy I met him with my father. Tiny fellow with outsized spectacles. Wearing a leopard-skin hat, and carrying a fetish stick. Young as I was, I could feel his insanity. Like some kind of radiation." He clicked his tongue against his teeth, a disappointed sound. "I used to think I understood this place, but lately...I don't know. Perhaps things have just gotten so bloody awful, I tend to complicate them. Make them into something they're not. Oh, well. I won't have to deal with it much longer."

"Oh," I said. "Why's that?"

He hesitated. "I was planning to tell you this tomorrow; I thought it might make an effective cure for a hangover." A pale smile. "I'm getting married next month. Beautiful girl named Helen Crowley. Extremely intelligent. Attached to the British embassy. She can't abide Africa, however, so we're going to live in London."

"Damn! When did all this happen?"

"I met her last year, but things didn't heat up until a couple of months ago."

I was startled. More than startled, actually. Rawley was the whitest African of my acquaintance, but he was nonetheless African through and through, and I couldn't imagine him being happy anywhere else. I asked if he was looking forward to living in England and he said, "You must be joking! A Third World country with a Second World climate. I can't fucking wait!" He fiddled with his cocktail napkin. "But she's...she wants.... Hell, you know how it goes."

I told him that I did, indeed, know how it went.

Rawley began to extol Helen Crowley's many virtues, and it struck me that he was attempting to excuse himself for running out on me, as if he believed that by marrying and exiling himself to Europe, he was effectively ending our relationship. Which was probably the case. My plans for the future, albeit sketchy, did not include a sojourn in England. I felt a childish resentment toward him. Though we only saw each other half a dozen times a year, he was the one real friend I had, and I had come to rely on his accessibility.

He tried to play to me, asking about my love life, suggesting that it was time for me to find someone as he had. My responses were terse and unaccommodating. With part of my mind, I recognized what an asshole I

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was being, but I was too drunk to censor myself. Not long afterward, I made my own excuses, told him I would meet him in the hotel bar the next evening after I talked with Buma, and staggered off to bed.

The drumming of the rain against the window in the darkened room caused me to feel dizzier, less in control, and thus I can't be sure what moved me to call Patience; but I think it may have been that Rawley's betrayal — so my drunken brain characterized it — inspired me to attempt to counterfeit a romantic relationship for myself; that would have been in keeping with the infantile tenor of my thoughts.

To my surprise, she picked up on the third ring. "Michael! I'm so happy to hear you! When you coming home?"

My toaster, I thought. Still mine.

All during the call, Patience urged me to hurry home, saying the Congo was a dangerous place and she was worried about me. This was, I assumed, her loneliness speaking. But her expression of concern suited my fantasies, and I found myself murmuring endearments, making the kind of assurances that should never be made drunkenly or lightly; and when she offered similar assurances in return, rather than retreating from the edge of this moral precipice, I let her voice comfort me and fell asleep with the phone pressed to my ear.

USUALLY AFTER drinking to excess, I sleep fitfully, tossing about, waking every so often, plagued by stomach pains and anxiety dreams; but that night I slept soundly and the only dream that came was not the typical helter-skelter of surreal adventures and circumstances, but had a clarity and mental coloration unlike that of any dream I had theretofore experienced. I was moving rapidly through shallow water, not swimming so much as being carried along by the current. Clouds of brownish yellow sediment stirred up by the passages of others before me obscured my vision, yet I could still make out reeds undulating on the river bottom, wedges of stone extruded from the bank. Within minutes, the water became cooler, deeper, greener, and I could no longer see the bottom. I was being drawn toward something, but what exactly that thing was, I did not know. While it was not in my nature to be afraid, I had a sudden comprehension of fear, of its potentials, and this caused me to become

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more alert to my surroundings, as might happen when food was near. But this knowledge was unimportant, for even had I been capable of fear, I somehow trusted the thing toward which I was being drawn; I understood that it was not inimical.

The current grew faster, the water darkened to a cold blue, and I was overcome by a great lassitude. All my strength was draining from me, yet at the same time I sensed that I was accumulating new strength of a sort I could not fully understand. A subtler form of power than my old strength, but no less serviceable. In the distance I saw a glowing patch of brighter blue, barely a spot, but increasing in size with every passing second, and I knew that this brightness was the signal fire of my destination....

I'm not certain what woke me, but I believe it must have been a lightning strike, for I heard thunder, and lightning forked down the sky, illuminating tracers of rain. I was still half involved in the tag ends of the dream — it had been so compelling, it seemed to pull at me as inexorably as had that glowing patch of blue. Yet at the same time I was terrified, and my heart raced. Rain was pouring down my face, into my eyes, matting my hair, and I was utterly disoriented. The last thing I remembered of the waking world was Patience's voice in my ear, a pillow beneath my head. I hugged myself against the chill, and realized I was outside, wearing only a pair of briefs. A flicker of distant lightning showed my immediate surroundings. I was standing atop the rock where that afternoon I had seen the crocodiles at their strange ménage. Beneath me, water churned against the bank, and on the far side of the river, the shadowy crest of the jungle trees swayed against the lesser darkness of the sky, bending all to the left, then straightening, with the ponderous rhythm of a dancing bear. On every side, the crunch and tatter of windy collisions, and from above, the constant battering of thunder.

Even after I had recognized my location, I remained terrified. I had no idea what could have happened. The idea of somnambulism had not yet entered my mind; instead, it seemed I had been spirited from my bed by the force of a dream to a place referenced by the dream; though confused, I was not confused about that — whether a product of my drunken imagination or of something more inexplicable, I had been dreaming a crocodile dream. I began to shiver, and this was not entirely due to the cold. The toiling dark was full of dangers, and I would have to negotiate

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nearly a mile of it before reaching the hotel. But no other option was open to me. I shuffled about, afraid of turning abruptly and losing my balance, and as I took my first step toward the hotel, a deafening crack of thunder — like the parting of some fundamental seam — shredded the clouds overhead, and I was knocked onto my back by a blast of vivid red light. A foundry color, like the molten shell that encases a white hot core of liquefied steel. It was as if I'd been cupped in a fiery hand for a split-second and then cast aside. For several seconds thereafter, I was dazed by the concussion, blinded, my nostrils stinging with the reek of ozone; when my vision cleared, I saw that a dead tree close by the rock had been struck by the lightning and was ablaze, serving as a torch to illumine a considerable portion of the flats, causing puddles to glitter and shining up all the slick muddy skin of the place. At the landward end of the rock, no more than twenty feet away, blocking my exit, was a crocodile.

This was no ordinary crocodile, but one of nature's great criminals, as unruled in its own place and time as the tyrannosaur. A creature, a beast, a monster. Fully sixteen feet long, I reckoned it. The top of its massive head at rest was parallel with the mid-point of my thigh, and its open jaws could have accommodated an oil drum. With its scales gilded by the firelight, its pupils cored with orange brilliance, it would have been at home by Cerberus's side, an idol of pure menace guarding a portal into hell — that was my first thought (if I can call those chill lancings of affrighted, garbled language that shot through my brain "thoughts"), that beyond the portcullis of stained and twisted teeth, deep in its hollow tube of a belly, lay a gateway opening onto some greater torment.

The largest branch of the burning tree broke off and fell with a hiss into the river. In the diminished light, the croc's aspect changed from that of demiurge to the purely animal. A bloated grayish green lizard with a pale, thick tongue and cold mineral eyes and corrosive, rotting breath, a creature that would chew through my torso as though it were an underdone strip of bacon, then lift its head and, utilizing its powerful throat muscles, shift me down into its stomach, where — coated in sticky acids — I would quietly dissolve over a period of days, sharing the ignominy of a partly consumed river bass, its glazed eyes contemplating me with doting steadfastness as we lay together in our cozy, messy little cave.

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To this point, disorientation had dominated my fear, but now my uncertainty as to what had happened was washed away by a single horrid certainty, and the disabling weakness that accompanies deep terror infused my limbs. My instinct was to throw myself into the water, but there I would be totally helpless. Instead, I tried to prepare for a quick sprint, a leap. If I jumped toward the bank at an angle from the middle of the rock, I might be able to gain a foothold and scramble up and make my escape. The odds of success were not good, but then the odds favoring any other course of action were far worse. It would have been helpful if the crocodile had bellowed, made a violent noise that outvoiced the wind — that might have acted upon me like a starter's pistol and given me a boost of energy. But crocs only bellow when their territory is threatened, and I was no threat, I was mere prey. Its baleful regard was more enfeebling than any sound could have been, and I knew that at any second it would lunge forward and take me.

In the moment before I jumped, I had an incidence of perfect clarity. It was if I were receding from the world, leaving the body behind. I saw myself, a black, insignificant figure, a human scrap on a splinter of rock above turbulent water, facing a slightly less tiny creature with a tail, and the entire dark geography of the flats, with its one torched tree and a few smaller, flickering lights in the distance that might have been lanterns in the windows of shanty bars. I saw stitchings of lightning fencing the river valley, casting the hills in brief silhouette, bringing up the boxy shapes of Mogado from the shadows. I did not see my life pass before my eyes, but rather saw the sum of my life imprinted upon that unimportant landscape, and understood that in this cunning design with its drear prospect and trivial monster, all the wastage and impotence of my days, all my misused intellect and defrauded ambitions, all my torpid compulsions and arousals, all my puerile dreams and dissipated hopes and contemptible passions had found their proper resolution. And it was this sorry recognition, this abandonment of last illusions, that bred in me a liberating fatalism and freed my limbs from the grip of fear and let me jump.

I hit the side of the bank hard and slipped back. My feet touched the water, but I managed to claw out a handhold in the mud and hauled myself up onto level ground. Lightning strobed as I rolled away from the water's edge, and in those bright detonations I caught sight of the crocodile. Just

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a glimpse. It was in the process of turning toward me. Jaws agape. I flung myself away, and came to my feet running. Thunder obscured all other sound, but I could have sworn I felt the croc close behind, the awful gravity of the beast swinging its head round to bite. As I ran, as it became apparent that I was not going to die, I began to laugh. I stumbled, I fell half a dozen times, I tore my skin on stones, on dead branches, but I continued to laugh until I was too exhausted to do more than breathe. It seemed ridiculous that I should have survived. Silly. Life itself seemed silly, when there was so much death to be had. The average human activity in Africa was dying, or so I perceived it then, and to be spared in this situation abrogated at least the law of averages, if not other, more consequential laws.

I burst through the hotel doors, somehow failing to wake the African teenager behind the reception desk, and went into the bar, empty and lightless now, and helped myself to a bottle of whiskey; I sat down at one of the tables and had a restorative drink. Then I had another. I started laughing again, and this served to wake the kid at the desk. He peeked in the doorway, a startled look on his face; then he vanished, and I heard his footsteps moving away. Not long afterward, Dillip — wearing a fetching bathrobe of embroidered green silk — made his appearance. His manner was at first stern, but on seeing my condition — all but naked, streaked with mud, bleeding, wild of countenance — he stopped short of rebuking me. He went behind the bar, picked a glass from the rack and, with an air of prim disappointment, brought it to me. I thanked him and poured the glass half full.

"What can have happened to you, sah?" Dillip asked, hovering by the table.

I did not know how to tell him and only shook my head.

He drew up a chair and sat opposite me, adjusting the fall of his robe to cover his bony knees. From his expression, I gathered that he had not yet decided whether to be reproving or indulgent of my curious behavior.

"Do you require medical assistance?" Dillip asked.

"No," I said. "No, just a drink or two."

This did not sit well with him. "Sah, you must tell me what has happened. If something has happened to you in the hotel, I must report it."

"Nothing happened in the hotel." I pointed with the whiskey bottle. "Out there."

"Ah!" said Dillip. "You have been robbed, then. Bandits!"

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I considered accepting this judgment; it would be easier than trying to explain the events of the evening. But when I put everything together in my head—my sleepwalking, the storm, the crocodile, Buma—I did not arrive at an American conclusion, but an African one.

"Not bandits," I said. "Mobutu."

AFRICAN POLITICS ARE frequently intertwined with the cult of personality. Perhaps because the land is vast, the men who pretend to rule it must proclaim their own vastness, each in a highly individual way...ways that are rarely beneficial to those whom they have been elected to serve. For instance, not far from Abidjan lies the village of Yamosoukra, the birthplace of Felix Houphouet-Boigny, the former president of the Ivory Coast. Upon his ascendancy to the office, the president initiated a building program designed to turn Yamosoukra into a new capital, one that would rival Brasilia. He had long held an admiration for St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and so nothing would do but that he erect a copy of the church half again as large as the original close to the village, and to provide better access to this newly historic area, he ordered the construction of a six-lane highway. The need for six-lane highways in West Africa is slight, if not nonexistent. The first time I drove along the highway, at what ordinarily would be considered rush hour, I encountered only one other person, an old man in a shabby brown suit riding a bicycle. That this building program nearly bankrupted the country was of secondary importance to President Houphouet-Boigny and his supporters; of primary importance was that in their minds this spanking new, empty, purposeless city and its various accessories established to the world the greatness of the man and suggested that he was not someone to be trifled with.

Mobutu Sese Seko favored more of a minimalist approach to achieving this same effect. It suited him to create a fearsome ring of security about himself and throughout Kinshasa, and to permit the remainder of the Congo (which he renamed Zaire) to fall into ruin. Beyond Kinshasa, the jungle overran the outlying highways, and the infrastructure crumbled, leaving a poverty-stricken populace without any resources other than the sweat of their brows. Did not this cruel policy express a godlike indifference to suffering? Was not a reign of more than thirty years funded by this

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unvarying indifference evidence of the man's invulnerability and power? Might not such a man use his dying strength to visit some final and lasting pain upon his people by means of a curse? And might not the people, disposed to belief in his godhood by thirty years of oppression, be so psychologically in thrall to him that by dint of national will they had managed to make the curse manifest, or — put more basically — they had caused it to come true?

This last was one of the questions I put to Buma the next afternoon. I was not in the best of shape. I felt cracked, things broken inside my head, the shape of my faith in logical process gone lopsided, and my hands trembled from fatigue and alcohol. Nothing I saw that day helped to right me. At the jail, the desk officer's newspaper told of a village twenty miles downriver destroyed by fire — lightning or tribal violence, no one could say, for there were no survivors — and a small headline below the fold reported that fish were dying by the thousands in a lake fed by the Kilombo. The cause was unknown.

"As long as you ask these questions," Buma said, "you will never know the answers." He was, as before, sitting sideways to me, gazing at the whitewashed wall, maintaining his customary reptilian poise. "Yet if you learn not to ask them, someday the knowledge will come."

"Yeah, uh-huh," I said. "If you sit perfectly still, the world will move through you, and everything is everything else. I've heard the same crap from slicker hustlers than you."

"You're angry because your dream was interrupted." He turned his head to me, his seamed face calm, that thin smile in evidence. "Don't worry. You'll finish it tonight. Then you will understand."

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of asking how he knew about my interrupted dream; but I couldn't stop myself.

"Because it is my dream," he said. "Because I gave it to you." He refitted his gaze to the wall, and I imagined he was seeing through the whitewash to the bloodstained surface beneath, the dark Mobutu skin that stretched across the entire country — it could be covered up, but never truly obscured.

I didn't know what more to ask — most of the questions crowding my brain were those I needed to ask of myself. Questions relating to my behavior with Rawley, my overall stability. I had never before walked in

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my sleep, and though I had no knowledge concerning the causes of somnambulism, I assumed they must be pathological.

In spite of my confusion, my self-absorption, I managed to frame a question for Buma. Not a particularly intelligent question, but it would serve to occupy him while I thought of a better one.

"Who are you?" I asked him. "Who do you think you are?"

"Do you see, Michael? It is always best to be direct. All your previous questions have begged the issue. But this...this is to the point."

"Then why don't you answer it?"

"Sometimes I think I am a man." His smiled widened. "But then I remember that I am not."

"This non-responsive style of yours," I said, "it's the classic tactic of the charlatan. The cryptic answer, the knowing nod. All it suggests is that you have nothing salient to tell me. It's obvious that you're a clever man, that you're using what you've deduced about me from our conversations to try and persuade me of your supernatural abilities. But I'm not buying it."

Buma let out a hissing breath, a sign — I thought — of exasperation. "Your assumption seems to be that by answering you I will be helping myself, and you further assume that I am not answering you. In the first place, I do not need your help. In the second, I have given you a dream, and I have confessed to murder. If you wait and listen and watch, you will learn the rest. You must have patience, Michael."

The word "patience" startled me. "What do you mean by that?" I asked.

He eyes swung toward me. "Have you ever watched crocodiles hunt? How they wait and wait, how they persevere. Time and again they will attack and fail, yet they remain persevering. Because they have patience. If I were the king of the crocodiles, I would be the king of patience. Patience is much more than a simple virtue, Michael. Surely you know that?"

He was doing exactly what I had said — probing, making rudimentary deductions, then using my reactions against me. But though I thought I understood him, this talk of patience led me to suspect that he had some connection with my Patience, or that he knew about her. A hundred wild suppositions contended in my brain, along with fantasies about crocodile

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kings with thin, false smiles and women who sat sideways and cut their eyes toward you rather than turning their heads; but I refused to give in to them.

"What...." I began, and then forgot the question I'd intended to ask; I searched for another and asked, for no particular reason, simply because it was the only thing that occurred: "The river.... Is there something wrong with the river?"

Buma got to his feet. He stepped to the wall, knocked against it with the sides of his iron cuffs, dislodging a roughly triangular section of flaking whitewash, revealing a large dark patch beneath. "Do you see this?" he asked. "This is what is wrong with the river. With all things. No matter how pure the surface, beneath it lies insanity and dread. Some will tell you it is Mobutu who is to blame. Others will say something different. They are each right in their own way. Mobutu. Poison. Bacteria. Curses. These are merely names for the incurable cancer spreading from the heart of the world, the terror from which life itself springs. We are all fleeing it. We try to swim away, we travel far from home, we tell ourselves it is a dream, we imprison ourselves in palaces, we speak to God on the mountain top. We can never escape it, however, because we are part of it. Yet we must try, because that is our nature." He sat back down, making a dull rattle with his chains. "Crocodiles understand this more clearly than do men. They are simple creatures, and simple answers do not elude them."

I was dancing with him now, he was playing me and logic could not stand against him. His words, though scarcely original, a medley of bleak clichés, had tapped into the core of my weakness, and all the fear I had nourished over long years in Africa, all the peculiarly African fear, the apprehension of spirits, of lion ghosts and magical presidents and the long-legged, licorice-skinned, lickety-split demons of the talking drum dancing with arms akimbo on the margins of one's campfire light, ready to pounce with their red-hot spears and golden teeth...all this was loose in me, raving like a storm inside my skull, and I had the unshakable presentiment that if I didn't move I would be trapped with this man who claimed not to be a man in that little white cell forever. I scraped back my chair, staggered against the wall, the wall infected with blood and darkness, and as I moved haltingly toward the door, Buma smiled at me. The cracks in his wrinkled, youthful face seemed to deepen so drastically, I thought his skin would fly

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apart into a kind of weathered shrapnel, releasing the all-consuming, crocodile-reeking blackness beneath.

"Remember, Michael," he said. "Have patience. No matter what befalls the world, whether fire or ice, if you have patience, you will thrive."

Dusk came suddenly as I left the jail, dragged in — it appeared — by flights of crows that swooped just above the rooftops, screaming down harsh curses on the people below. I badly wanted a drink, and since I was now persona non grata with Dillip, I headed for the nearest shanty bar, a construction of warped boards alternately painted pink and yellow and blue, furnished with picnic-style tables and lit by a kerosene lantern. All topped off by a rust-scabbed tin roof. The bartender, an enormous woman in a flowered dress, her hair wrapped in a white cloth, provided me with a bottle with a Jim Beam label that did not contain Jim Beam, but something yellowish-brown and vile and strong as poison. I drank it gratefully. Soon the woman came to resemble a deity, marooned by a spill of lantern light in the soft darkness behind a two-plank countertop, her shiny black plump breasts the source of all fecundity, her broad round face as serene as those faces at the corners of antique maps that signify the east wind. At another table sat three men, all young, muscular, two of them wearing polo shirts and jeans, the other jeans and a pink T-shirt decorated with the image of a pony. Pink T-shirt was fiddling with the dials of a transistor radio, bringing in static-filled reggae. Now and then he would glance sternly at me, as if he disapproved of my presence. But I didn't care. I was ablaze with the happiness that only a satisfied drunk can know, liberated from yet not unmindful of my troubles. They seemed manageable now. Even the pronounced possibility that I was experiencing mental slippage seemed a trivial matter, one that could be reconciled in due course. And what if I was perfectly healthy? That was a possibility, I realized, that I had not given sufficient credence. It was not utterly beyond the pale to think that Buma was the king of the crocodiles, or that Mobutu's curse was despoiling the Kilombo, or that Patience was more than a simple virtue. Then, too, it might be true both that I was slipping and that the world was mad enough to support crocodile kings and rule by voodoo. But it was unlikely that anyone could decide these questions, so why worry about them?

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"You are an American Negro, I believe," said Pink T-shirt, who without my notice had come to stand by my table, his pals at his shoulder. I could not deny the fact, though I found the word "Negro" rankling. Pink T-shirt introduced himself as Solomon, and he and his friends, whose names I promptly forgot, joined me.

"Are you a student of history?" Solomon asked, enunciating his words with the profound dignity and slow precision of the very drunk. His friends did not appear capable of speech. Drifting, eyes rolling, almost on the nod. I told Solomon I was a student of snakes, but he did not respond to this; his impassively handsome face was arranged in a contemplative mask. "I am a student of history," he said. "At the university in Kinshasa. I have studied the history of the American Negro."

"I see," I said. "And what have your studies taught you?"

He nodded, as if I had made a statement and not asked a question. Tiny yellow circles of reflected lantern light lensed his pupils. "I am curious about the American Negro's perspective on Africa."

Having been elected the American Negro for purposes of the conversation, I felt a responsibility to offer something cogent in reply. "It's a complex subject," I said. "After all, Africa is not one thing, but many. And the American Negro is a term that embodies a number of perspectives."

In the gathering dark outside, two little girls in pale smocks came chasing after a huge sow, one of them flicking at her rump with a long switch.

"It is my thesis," Solomon said, regarding me with what I suspected he thought was an imperious stare, "that because he both venerates and despises the African, the American Negro stands closer to a white perspective on the continent than to the African. In effect, he is no longer part of the black race."

The black race, I thought. A mystery novel. A description of the River Styx. A nighttime cycling event. I wanted to feel respect for Solomon...or if not respect, then sadness. I suppose I felt a little of both. He had, after all, managed a university education — not the easiest thing to achieve in the Congo — and his simplistic take on his subject implied an unfruitful and outmoded agenda that was, in its historical context, sad. It was also sad that Solomon was apparently unaware of his subtext, in which — if he examined it — he would find reflected a specific variety of self-loathing

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endemic among failed or inadequately prepared African intellectuals. But what I mainly felt was annoyance. I had been involved in far too many of these spurious philosophical discussions to feel challenged by them, as Solomon — I believed — wanted me to feel. Though it was possible to gain insights from indulging in such quasi-intellectual pissing matches, the type of insights one gained were in essence judgmental and inclined to make you feel superior to the Solomon-of-the-moment. And even if those judgments were relevant, even if they illuminated some twist of African behavior, some intricate contradiction that in turn illuminated a fragment of colonial history or post-colonial politics, they tended to make you think that you understood Africans...and if you believed that, then you had fallen into the same sort of simplistic trap as had Solomon. As had many journalists and sloppy novelists, who transformed such encounters into pithy anecdotes. It was impossible to avoid making judgments, but why bother to deify them? No, annoyance was the proper reaction. Solomon was spoiling my drunk.

"You know," I said, as one of his friends slumped against the wall and began to snore. "I used to believe in approaching subjects like the American Negro and his perspective on Africa from an academic standpoint. But now, I guess I think that all this shit — y'know, life, Africa, the rules of chess, love, all that — I guess I think the best way to understand it is just to feel it along your skin."

Solomon took a moment to absorb this. "You are laughing at me," he said.

"Not at all. I'm speaking to you exactly as I would speak to anyone who said what you said to me. If what I say doesn't validate you in the way you'd like, I'm sorry."

Two young women entered the bar and began chatting with the bartender. One was pretty, wearing a simple yellow dress; she looked over to our table and smiled.

"Whores," said Solomon, following my gaze. "Perhaps you would rather talk to whores."

"I'm only human," I told him; then I asked: "Here's something I can approach from an academic stance. Tell me what you think of Mobutu."

Solomon pursed his lips. "I'm not disposed to discuss this with you."

"That's fair." The woman in the yellow dress was peeking at me over

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her friend's shoulder; she caught my eye, covered her mouth to hide a smile, and whispered in her friend's ear.

Solomon now began discussing American Negro writers he admired. In his opinion, James Baldwin, though a degenerate, was the most African of them all. I couldn't decide if this bespoke a startling new comprehension on his part, or was absolute bullshit. Soon, accepting that I did not want to play, Solomon and his friends left the bar, but not before the man who had been asleep, who had heard nothing of the conversation, turned back to the table and with shy formality, extended his hand to be shaken.

A few minutes later, the woman in the yellow dress — Elizabeth by name — was sitting beside me and had placed my hand between her legs, separated from her secret flesh by a thin layer of cotton. "Do you feel it?" she whispered. "Beating like the heart of a little bird?" Her eyes were large and beautifully shaped, her features delicate, her small breasts perfectly round. She had a strange spicy scent. The rains had begun — late, that day — and the drops drew a tremulous droning resonance from the tin roof; the bartender switched on her radio, and a man with a hoarse romantic tenor sang in French, a song about a boy torn between lust for a city woman and longing for his village sweetheart. At that instant, my perspective on Africa was pervaded by dizziness and desire. Even when Elizabeth asked me for money ("You know, you will have to give me a present."), she did so sweetly, almost apologetically, in keeping with my mood, with the mood of that place and moment. And when I gave her more than the present she had expected, she slipped my hand beneath the yellow cotton and offered me access to the proof of her own desire.

There was a room attached to the back of the bar, just big enough for a cot and a table bearing a lantern, with a window covered by a plastic curtain imprinted with red roses. When the curtain was pulled back, you could see a banana frond caressing the pane, like the green foreleg of some large, gentle insect. Fucking Elizabeth made me think of Patience, though not with guilt or any negative emotion. She simply reminded me of Patience in her playful exuberance and — all things being relative — her guilelessness: I didn't doubt that she might try to rob me, yet I knew that if she did it would not be premeditated, but the result of a whim, an irresistible impulse. One way or another, I wasn't concerned. She already had almost all of the cash I'd brought from the hotel. And so, once I was

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happily spent, I felt not the least compunction against falling asleep in her arms.

If I had remembered Buma's promise that I would finish my interrupted dream, I might have fought off sleep; but I did not, and the dream took me unawares. The glowing patch of blue in the depths of the river toward which I had been heading...I was past it, I had gone through it and was swimming up toward the surface. Swimming had always been second nature to me, but now it took all my strength, and I found I could not breathe, that it was necessary to hold my breath as I strained toward the light. I couldn't remember very much of what had happened to me within the patch of glowing blue, but I did recall that it had been painful, and I was certain that whatever had happened was responsible for the physical changes I was experiencing.

At last I broke the surface, sputtering and coughing, so weak I could barely swim to shore. When I reached the bank, I scrambled up the side and to my amazement, I discovered that I was standing on my hind legs. Standing upright as did those slight dark creatures upon whom I sometimes fed. Then I glanced down at my body. My arms were smooth and unwrinkled, my hands clawless, and my chest was smooth, covered with a fuzzy growth. Tatters of my old familiar skin clung to my hips and legs, but it was apparent that my legs were much longer than they had been. I let out a bellow of fear and rage, and was stunned by the frailty of my voice. Then I noticed others of my kind ranged along the bank, their condition the same as mine — changed, enraged, frightened. And hungry. I had never been so hungry in my life — it was as if I had never eaten. I bellowed again, and my brothers and sisters joined me, making an outcry that altogether might have equaled in volume the cry that one of us could have sounded before the change. But it was loud enough to attract the attention of creatures like ourselves yet not like us. Five of them. Fishermen on their way home.

We ran them down in the bush and threw them to the ground and fed. My mouth was not wide enough for proper biting, my teeth too small and blunt, but I managed; and as I fed, fear vanished, and in its place came understanding...understanding such as I could never have imagined. The world, it seemed, was larger and stranger than I had known, and now that my home had been corrupted by dark forces, I would have to leave it

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behind and seek another home — it was for this reason I had been changed. But changed by whom? By what? That knowledge was gone from me; though I believe I once had understood it, the space in my head where it had been seated was now filled with curious information, theories, schemes, languages, and systems, things I would not have believed existed. Yet my grasp of them was total, and I realized that armed with this knowledge, and with my old knowledge that — though I had forgotten much of it — still empowered me, I had the opportunity not merely to survive, but to rule. Men, I perceived, were not only frail of body, but of mind, easily swayed and easily broken, and I was convinced that I could dominate them.

There were six of us on the bank, one a young woman — with my human eyes I saw that she was lovely. Five of us understood all that had happened and what we must now do, but the woman was so young, so new not only to this world, but to the previous one, she remained confused. I instructed her to go into the city and to find someone who would take her to a safe place. In my mind's eye I saw a man from a distant country. I described him to her, told her where he lived, and sent her on her way. Then I, along with my four brothers and sisters, set out into the country we could not have imagined, but that we now meant to make our own.

I woke from the dream to find Elizabeth straddling me, holding me down by the shoulders, a terrified look on her face. She told me I had tried to leave the room while still asleep, but she had pushed me back down. I assured her that I was fine, but I was not fine. I could taste blood in my mouth, I remembered the sensation of ripping off a strip of human flesh and chewing it juiceless, I heard again the crack of a neckbone. These things, and not the mad logic of the dream, the idea that crocodiles were changing into men in order to escape some magical pollution of the Kilombo, persuaded me of the dream's validity. Even the irrational notion that Buma, newly human, had sent me a crocodile girl to protect seemed possible in light of these horrible memories. I could not overlook the possibility that Buma's power was merely the power of suggestion, or that my mind had been wired for madness by my years in Africa, conditioned to accept the most insane of propositions and to create improbable scenarios from the materials provided by a fraudulent witch man so as to explain away dysfunction. But for the time being I preferred the prospect

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of supernaturally transformed crocodiles to that of insanity, and I let Elizabeth console me.

I was thoroughly involved in the process of consolation when I heard voices raised in anger from the bar, and shortly thereafter the door to the little room swung open, and Rawley — his face flushed, his shirt and hair drenched with rain — stepped into view. "My God, Michael!" he said, averting his eyes. Elizabeth squealed, rolled off me and covered herself. "Are you mad?" Rawley said. "You know these women are all fucking diseased! What the hell were you thinking?"

I sat up, pulled on my briefs, and said sullenly, "Don't worry about it."

"Fine! I won't worry. But we did have a meeting scheduled. I trust you won't mind too much if I express some concern over the fact that you fucking failed to show up!"

I buckled my belt, shrugged into my shirt. "Just go easy," I said. "I've had a rough day."

"Oh, really? Yes, I suppose you have. Few of life's difficulties compare to the arduous nature of an evening spent drinking and whoring."

It was amazing, the amount of loathing I felt toward him — this bloated blond bug in his signature golf shirt and chinos, with his political dabbling and his tight-ass fiancée, who was he to berate me? "I don't think," I said tightly, "that my information has been degraded by tardiness."

"Degraded," he said. "Interesting choice of terms, that."

I finished buttoning my shirt; behind me, Elizabeth struggled into her dress. "Gee, what crawled up your ass, Jimmy? No, don't tell me. I bet the lovely Helen has something to do with it. What's the problem? She having trouble prying her knees apart?"

"You bastard!" He glared at me, puffed up with anger. "Here I throw you a bone for friendship's sake, and what do you do? You...."

"A bone?" I said. "I'm not your fucking dog, Jimmy. I'm your boy. Whenever you get into trouble, you come running to rub my nappy head for luck. You did it at Oxford, and you're doing it now. Trouble with a Classics exam? Hey, Michael! Mind coming over and letting me knuckle your headbone. I'll stand for the drinks."

Rawley composed himself — he was above all this, he refused to get down in the gutter with me. "I'm not going to hold this against you. You're drunk. We'll talk in the morning, when you're capable of reason."

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With a worried glance at me, Elizabeth squeezed past Rawley and vanished into the bar.

"Let's talk now," I said. "In the morning I'm gone."

He appeared to take this as a surrender, an admission on my part of wrong-headedness. "Very well. But let's go back to the hotel. We might be overheard here."

"It's your game," I said. "We might as well play on your home court."

"Can we stop this?" He spread his hands as if to demonstrate he was holding no weapons. "Christ, Michael. We have ten years of history together, and this isn't the first time we've fought. If you want me to apologize for breaking in on you and the girl...I apologize. I've been under so much pressure, perhaps I haven't been sensitive to the fact that you're under pressure, too. If so, I apologize for that as well." He stepped forward, extending the hand of friendship. "Come on, man. What do you say?"

I had always been a chump for his diplomatic side, even though I knew it was entirely tactical, and that it came as easily to him as eating bananas to a monkey. I took his hand, I accepted his clumsy embrace, but I knew in my heart that we were finished.

"No problem," I said.

I BOUGHT A BOTTLE of yellowish brown poison from the bartender, and we set out toward the hotel. The rain had diminished to a drizzle, and as we crossed the pitch-dark flats, Rawley shined a flashlight ahead to show obstacles in our path, the beam sawing across broken glass and stumps and once a scurrying rat. I was very drunk, but my drunkenness was cored by a central clarity, and though my coordination was not good, my mind was charged with a peculiar energy that permitted me to think and speak with no sign of affliction. Between pulls on the bottle, I told Rawley about my conversations with Buma, the dreams, Mobutu's curse, and my encounter with the crocodile, the odd behavior of the crocodiles I had witnessed on the day of my arrival in Mogado. I gave it to him flatly, as if it were all plain fact, with no mention of my self-doubts or any other of my reservations.

"That's absolute nonsense," Rawley said; then hurriedly, not wanting to

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risk — I supposed — reinstituting an adversarial atmosphere: "I mean it sounds like nonsense."

"Like you said — Buma's impressive. He's obviously expert at mind-fucking people. Whether or not there's something more arcane behind that...It's not really important. Your problem is to decide whether you can successfully prosecute him. My feeling is that you can't. Imagine what he could do with a jury. Or with the court, for that matter."

Two young men passed us in the dark, walking in the opposite direction; they shielded their eyes against Rawley's flash and offered a polite greeting.

"I may have no choice," Rawley said. "I'm getting increasing pressure from Kinshasa. My ultimate problem may lie in trying to shift the blame for his acquittal away from me and onto the court."

"Why is this important? You're going to England. One trivial defeat won't spoil your entire record."

"My family will still be here. These bastards are capable of anything. If they get all in a twist about Buma, they might threaten our business interests. They might do more than that." He swung the flashlight in a short arc, the beam whitening the trunk and upswept branches of a dead tree, making it look for an instant like the skeleton of some strange animal, frozen forever in an anguished pose. "God, sometimes I hate this country."

We walked in silence a few paces; finally I said, "If I were you, I wouldn't mess with Buma. Suppose he's acquitted. Let's not even talk about whether he used to be a crocodile. Let's just say that he's a member of a cult, and once he's acquitted, the cult gets a lot of ink. A lot of power. He could be more dangerous than your friends back in Kinshasa."

"Unfortunately," Rawley said, "you're not me. And I'm not you. I have responsibilities I can't dodge."

And fuck you, too, I thought; I hope the son of a bitch bites you in half.

We were passing a point parallel to the rock where I had been trapped by the big crocodile. I mentioned this to Rawley, suggested he might want to have a look.

"Why not," he said.

We angled toward the river, walked along it for a minute or so, then Rawley's flash picked out that tooth of dark rock extending out over the Kilombo.

"No action tonight," said Rawley as he stepped out onto it. I remained

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on the bank. "Not a sign of a fucking croc," he went on. He swung the flash across the surface of the water and laughed. "Buma must have given them marching orders."

The clouds broke, and a thin silver moon like a fattened hook sailed up from behind them. Rawley came back onto the bank, shot me an amused glance. "Are you sure you weren't drunk?"

"You know me, boss," I said coldly. "I can't scarcely see nothin' 'less I's drinkin'."

In the weak silvery light, with a blond forelock drooping over his forehead to touch an eyebrow, his face looked oddly simple, childlike. "We have a few things to work out, don't we?" he said. "I understand that, Michael. God only knows who we were back at Oxford. I can't even remember those people, except that they were complete fucking idiots. But I'm certain they weren't you and me. They weren't us the way we are now." He twitched the beam of the flashlight off along the bank. "Despite the shit people do to one another, we've stuck it out together. Perhaps not always for the purest of motives. But we have done, and I can't help but believe there's some good reason we've come this far. Don't you think that's a possibility worth exploring?"

His words were so unexpected, I couldn't muster a response; but I was, against my will, touched by them. Embarrassed, he turned toward the town and swept the flashlight inland; as the beam traveled across the ground, the light reflected off what appeared to be a row of yellow-orange jewels set atop a semicircle of dead logs. Logs with wrinkled, leathery bark and weird turreted structures atop their narrow snouts. Rawley let out a little gasp, as if he'd taken a playful blow to the belly, and focused the beam on the log closest to us. A crocodile. Not a very big one, maybe eight feet long. But some of its friends were bigger. There must have been fifteen or twenty of them, maybe more. Just sitting. Watching. Forming a barrier in every direction except one.

Rawley took a step backward onto the rock. "Jesus," he said. "Oh, Jesus." Another croc let out a ghastly hiss.

I was not afraid...not for myself, at any rate. It was as if the electric arc of fear had gapped and failed to engage my nerves. Perhaps I was too drunk to feel fear. Yet I was afraid for Rawley. He took another backward step, stumbled, and in doing so, went farther out onto the rock.

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"No!" I shouted, beckoning to him. "Run! You've got to run! This way!"

I sprinted toward the crocodile closest to the bank. It was strange. I ran, it seemed, not fired by an instinct for self-preservation, but by the need to demonstrate to Rawley the proper method of escape. I may have felt a touch of fright as I hurdled the croc — it snapped at me half-heartedly — but it was nothing compared to the terror I had experienced the previous night. I landed awkwardly on one foot, spun half about, and fell hard on my chest. For the space of a few seconds, perhaps a bit more, I lost my wind. When I regained it, I came to one knee and looked back at Rawley. He had not followed my example. He was standing near the riverward end of the rock, made to seem small by the vastness of the sky that had opened up above him, with its scattering of wild stars and silver cicatrice of moon. His pale hair flew in the breeze, and the tail of his shirt fluttered; the beam of the flashlight struck downward from his left hand like a frail gold wand, his only weapon against the crocodiles massed and slithering toward him from the landward end of the rock. There was no way he could hurdle them now. Our gazes met. He said nothing, and at that distance, his expression was unreadable; but he must have known he was doomed. I called out his name and came a step toward him, thinking there must be something I could do. I screamed at the crocodiles, but they were intent upon him, crawling over one another in their eagerness for his blood.

Rawley whirled about, the flashlight beam drawing a yellow stripe across the bright water. He glanced back at me once more, a mere flicking of his eyes, not a signal or message so much as a reflex, a last hopeful engagement of life, and then he dived into the Kilombo, a racer's dive learned in his shining youth and practiced in the green pools of Oxford. The crocodiles surged forward. Rawley surfaced about twenty feet from the bank, just as the first of the crocs went into the water; he headed down river, stroking a racing crawl, aiming for a place some fifteen yards away where the bank jutted out. I didn't think he had a chance — a dozen crocs were in the water now, arrowing after him, their bodies only partially submerged, moonstruck eyes aglitter. But Rawley was making decent headway, and I began to hope for him. Then the croc nearest him submerged completely. A moment later he screamed and came twisting high out of the water, clawing at the air, a dark stain on his lips and chin.

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And then the croc took him under. The other crocodiles converged on the spot where Rawley had vanished, and the surface was transformed into a mêlée of thrashing tails and rooting snouts, a raft of scaly, undulating bodies, all splashing and bumping and skittering half out of the water as one croc slid up and across another's back in a display of murderous frolic. But there was no sign of the man they had killed.

I backed away from the bank; I felt unsound, unclear. Rawley's death had been real enough while it was occurring, but now it seemed I had imagined it, that I would have to re-imagine it in order to make it real. I was still holding my bottle, and now I hurled it into the river, as if it were damning evidence. And wasn't I culpable for having hated him, even if the hatred was transitory and the event itself a dire form of coincidence? Hadn't I brought him to the rock with murder in my heart?

The crocodiles began to swim away from the spot where Rawley had disappeared. Their fun was over. I sank to my knees, suddenly overcome by loss, and by the gruesome manner of his passing. I bent my head, pressed the heels of my hands against my brow, as if to compress the memory of what I had seen, to flatten it and make it so thin it would slip into a crack in my brain and never be found. The hypocrisy of my grief, coming as it did in such close conjunction with my internalized expression of loathing for Rawley, caused his death to weigh more heavily upon me than it otherwise might. Though I truly grieved, at the same time my tears seemed a form of indulgence, as if I were grieving for myself, for my own frail transgressions, or else trying to present a false appearance to whatever deity was watching, to convince him that I was sorry for my part in what had happened. And this duality of grief, this fictive quality overlaying the real, this sense of innermost duplicity, made my thoughts scamper and collide like confused rabbits on a killing ground. I thought my head would burst, I wanted it to burst, and I was disappointed when it did not.

At last I lifted my eyes. Not ten feet away along the bank, a crocodile was watching me. A smallish one, perhaps the same upon which Rawley had first shined his flashlight. Its jaws were slightly parted, its snaggled teeth in plain view, lending it a goofy look. A comical little death poised to pounce. My normal reactions were dammed up, and I could only stare at the thing. Numb, hopeless, and uncaring, I waited to die. Seconds ticked

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past, slow as water from a leaky tap. The croc began to seem familiar, almost human. Mad hilarity lapped the inside of my skull. I noted the croc's resemblance to George Bush. A distant relative, perhaps. An outside child conceived during a state visit. Then it bellowed, a glutinous, hollow noise — like a troll roaring in a cave — and that restored my natural animal terror. Its head jerked sideways, and it regarded me for a few beats with one cold gray eye, as if marking me for future reference. Then it whipped about, and moving in the ludicrous yet oh-so-efficient Chaplinesque paddling run of its species, it scuttled off into the shadows, leaving me to seek another solution to my misfortunes.

WHEN I REPORTED Rawley's death, the police in Mogado detained me; later that night, they charged me with his murder. There was no body, no evidence of any sort, except for the fact that I had been seen arguing with him, then walking with him in the direction of the river. No one reported seeing him afterward. Men had been convicted and executed for less in the Congo. I neither disputed nor affirmed the charge. In truth, I could not dispute or affirm it. Rawley's death lay at the center of a web of circumstance and possibility that could never be untangled. Unless one were to accept the explanation of my dream...or rather, Buma's dream. My three improbable escapes from the crocodiles of the Kilombo lent credence to this explanation, for had not Buma spat on my palm to protect me from his "brothers and sisters"? But I was not prepared to accept it.

Later that morning, the potbellied desk officer entered my cell and informed me that I was no longer under suspicion — I could leave; if I wished, I could return to Abidjan. I was in a state of shock and disbelief. "What do you mean?" I asked him. "I thought I was to be arraigned?"

He hesitated. "We've been told to let you go."

"By Kinshasa?"

The policeman dropped his eyes, as if embarrassed. "You are free to leave."

I considered the length of time it would likely take for the police to communicate with Kinshasa, then how much longer it would be before Kinshasa could get through their ritual rounds of squabbling and communicate an official reaction. "It wasn't Kinshasa who gave the order, was it?"

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Thepoliceman beckoned to me peremptorily. "Come along now. I have your possessions at the desk."

"Buma," I said "The crocodile man. It was him, wasn't it? He gave the order."

"If you refuse to come with me," said the policeman, "I will have you dragged from the cell."

It was clear what must have happened. With Rawley no longer serving as a buffer between them and Buma, the police — with their superstitions, their belief in sorcery — would have been easy prey for Buma's mind games. In fact, they probably had never thought that I was a real suspect in the murder. I was only a bone they intended to throw to Kinshasa, a stand-in for Buma, whom they were too afraid of to prosecute. What I didn't understand was why Buma would have me set free. "Where is he?" I asked. "Where's Buma?"

The policeman gazed stonily at me. "He is gone."

"You released him?"

"He is gone."

'"Where.... Where did he go?"

The policeman shrugged. He half-turned, then glanced back at me. "He left you a message."

I waited, and after checking the hallway to make sure no one else was listening, the policeman provided me with the final piece of the puzzle.

"Have patience," the policeman said. "That is all he told me to tell you. Have patience."

It is as I said at the outset, you must not think of me as a reliable witness. Instead, you must read what I have written as you would testimony in a murder trail. You must weigh it and make a judgment according to the dictates of your experience. There is, I believe, one way to determine whether it is I who am mad, if — to justify my sins, perhaps even to hide a murderous act — I have conjured this story out of hints and intimations and a handful of anomalies; or if madness has infected the entire world, if the dying curse of a tiny African giant has poisoned all the waters, if crocodiles are fleeing that curse by becoming men, and if James Rawley was executed by means of witchery because he refused to drop his prosecution of Gilbert Buma. In order to make that determination, I would

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have to travel five days upriver from Mogado to a spot marked by a ferry landing burnt by Mobutu's soldiers; I would have to walk inland until I came to a giant fig tree, and if then I were to find an albino rock python, it would be reasonable to conclude that magic and witchery have won the day. At the time of these events, I was not prepared to make that trip, and I remain unprepared to do so — the Kilombo is not a place to which I ever care to return. But perhaps a different kind of proof will be forthcoming.

Upon my return to Abidjan, I secured a visa for Patience and together we flew back to the States. Shortly thereafter we married and settled outside Ann Arbor, Michigan, not far from the Huron River. Patience likes being close to a river; she says it reminds her of home. Sometimes she will sit with me on the banks of the Huron, humming under her breath, and when she feels my eyes on her, she will cut her own eyes toward me and hold my stare just as Buma was in the habit of doing. I don't spend a great deal of time wondering about her origins; that would be fruitless. Though I may not have taken her seriously if it hadn't been for Buma's message and all that attended it, I try not to question either my mental state or the happiness that has come my way. I teach at the university, I come home at night to Patience, to love, and despite the fact that our immediate world appears to be in a state of collapse, with political scandal and murder and random violence reaching epidemic proportions, we have managed to find a degree of contentment.

Lately, however, something has been happening that, I think, bears upon the matter at hand. Each weekend I drive to Detroit to teach a class at the science museum. The freeway, I-95, is a curving stretch of concrete along which flow thousands of cars, rather like the Kilombo both in form and in usage, and sometimes as I drive, a dreamlike feeling steals over me, I become distant from human thoughts and desires, tranquil in the face of the unknown, and I see myself gliding along that white riverine strip, a soul and flesh encased in steel, one of thousands of such entities, and we are all moving inexorably toward a far-off patch of glowing red, brilliant and flickering like fire, drawn to it by a force beyond our comprehension, but confident that when we reach it we will be transformed in a fashion that will allow us to survive the great trouble that afflicts us all, clear in the truth of our salvation...not the much advertised salvation of religion, but salvation through the processes of nature, which often manifest in

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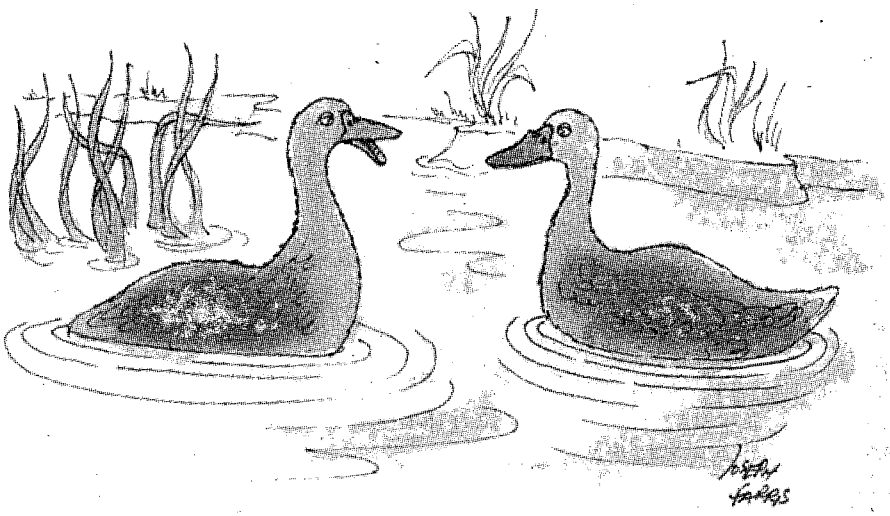
arcane ways and seem as wildly illogical as the consequences of a magic spell.

I recognize that there are at least two possibilities here. Either there is a natural process that is triggered by devastating environmental perils, one by which various of the imperiled are forced along a fast evolutionary track, crocodiles evolving into men, men into...some speculative form; or else my subconscious has constructed this entire scenario as a mechanism of penance and punishment for my self-perceived crimes, and the patch of fiery, cataclysmic red — to which I draw nearer each Saturday — promises the ultimate in transformations. A rationalist would favor the second possibility, but then of all humankind, rationalists are the most vulnerable to the effects of magic, the most confounded by the magical expressions of nature. As for me, I have no opinion, I am content to wait and learn, to have patience, to ask no questions, to accept what comes. For though you may not understand how this story ends, whether love is disproved by death, whether truth is revelatory or merely deductive, whether life itself is an elastic energy, a pure informality with the infinite potential of a charm, or a sad interlude enclosed by black brackets, one way or the other, I will soon know for certain. ☙



"If it looks like a human, walks like a human, yaks like a human, it's a human."

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CURIOSITIES

"THE SEEING I" AND OTHER GEMS

WHEN Gordon Van Gelder asked me to write the curiosities column for this issue, he said, "The columns are supposed to spotlight obscure or relatively forgotten books, but if you want to do something a little more offbeat (maybe the weirdest thing you received while you were editing the magazine), that'd be fine."

So I had a dilemma. Should I write about my congratulatory phone call from the scientist Linus Pauling? Or my first meeting with Isaac Asimov? Or the manuscript that came in a black envelope, with dead spiders taped to it, and spiderwebs wrapped around it?

Too many stories, so little space. Instead, I want to honor the magazine itself. The back issues provide a wealth of wonderful material, much of it forgotten.

My favorite find is Charles Beaumont's entertainment column, "The Seeing I," from December 1959. In it, he describes his hope for a series he's involved in, a series he hopes beyond hope will succeed. The show he's talking about? *The Twilight Zone.*

There are other gems scattered throughout. Some of the best stories sf ever produced were first published in these pages: "Starship Soldier," better known as *Starship Troopers; A Canticle for Leibowitz;* and "Flowers for Algernon." Harlan Ellison, James Tiptree, Jr. and Ursula K. Le Guin published some of their classic works here, alongside writers no longer familiar to our readers like Tom Reamy, Randall Garrett, and Reginald Bretnor. *F&SF* has also been a home for writers better known for their non-genre work, writers like Joyce Carol Oates, Truman Capote, and Kingsley Amis.

It's possible to get some of these stories in best-of anthologies or single author collections, but it's more fun to read the magazine's original pages and find, as I did, a Gahan Wilson parable alongside the last poem C. S. Lewis published.

As you thumb through the well-worn pages, who knows what you'll find? I found Charles Beaumont's *Twilight Zone* column while searching for something else. And it felt as if I'd found a forgotten treasure.

—Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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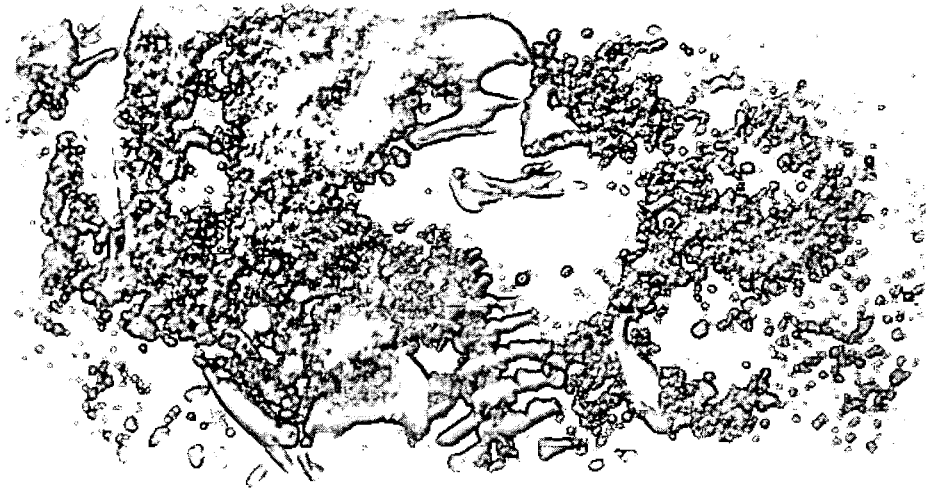
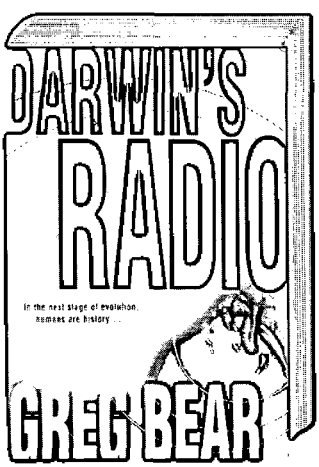
Has the Human Race Reached the Finish Line?





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Molecular biologist Kaye Lang has the theory: Ancient diseases encoded in human DNA can return to life.

"Virus hunter" Christopher Dicken has the proof: Dormant for millions of years, a flulike disease that kills expectant mothers and their offspring has suddenly woken up.... and begun to spread.

Together, they have precious little time. As the outbreak becomes an epidemic, Dicken and Lang must race to unlock the puzzle of the deadly genetic contagion that could alter the course of evolution in unthinkable ways....

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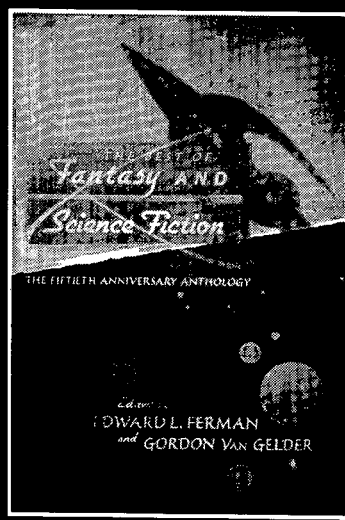

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